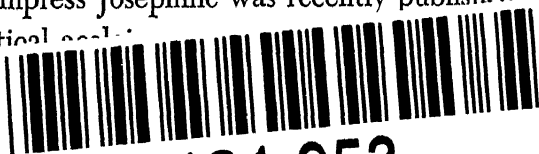


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Laval

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LAVAL

A Biography



G. P. Putnam's Sons
New York

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Laval as a young lawyer

Laval and Briand in Germany

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Laval consults Maître Baraduc (Associated Press Ltd)

FRESNES

[1]

THE CELLS AND corridors of the death-block in the prison of Fresnes were silent. The insistent clinking of chains had died away as the manacled men who awaited their turn for death finally fell asleep on their plank beds. Only in Cell 7 the light burned on, at the prisoner's own request. Peering through the hinged flap in the cell-door several times in every hour, the warder could see the prisoner seated on his stool at the table on the right-hand side of the cell, writing.

He was a little below average height, heavy-featured, his once dark hair now almost entirely grey, his swarthy cheeks sunken and tinged with yellow; a cigarette smouldered between the fingers of his left hand. The fetters around his ankles were linked by a chain, and this chain was linked by another to an iron ring on a leg of the bed behind him. He wore the shapeless, much-used denims that were issued to each condemned man in turn, the trousers oddly furnished with a row of buttons and buttonholes down each side-seam, to allow them to be removed without taking off the chains. As personal property, all that remained to him in the world, he had the underclothes that he was wearing, the overcoat that hung on a hook on the wall, a photograph of his family and his home in the Auvergne, a stack of American cigarettes on a shelf, two aeroplane hold-alls stuffed with documents, and a worn black brief-case lettered in gold: 'Pierre Laval, Président du Conseil'.

He was the most hated man in France, the focal point of the

nation's shame and revulsion, its evil genius. To most of the world outside he was a loathsome object, his coarse, saturnine features reproduced in a thousand cartoons, gloating, scheming, diabolical; a traitor and trickster, the creature and collaborator of Hitler and Mussolini; a human blot which free society would shortly expunge with the detergent volley of a firing squad.

It was the night of Friday, 12 October 1945, and with a superstitious dread he believed that the next day would be his last. The letters that he was writing were addressed to his family, to the world in general, and to 'my lawyers for their information and my executioners as a reply'. All his life he had preferred talking to writing, but now the pen that he held in his fine, strangely sensitive fingers – 'the hand of a Renaissance prelate,' somebody had once said – ran swiftly across the paper in neat, closely-written lines:

'It was not enough to prevent me from speaking; I had to be prevented from writing also. Why be rid of me so quickly, since I am in prison and in chains? . . .

'I asked that my trial should be reported in the *Journal Officiel*, so that the French people might know the accusation and my replies. This was refused me . . . They have always fought against me with lies, and I would have nailed these lies . . .

'I go to the eternal slumber. My conscience is at peace . . . I weep for my family, to whom I bring suffering. I wish for my country that I love the happiness and liberty that has been ravished from her. She will find them one day with different ethics and with other leaders. I wait for death and will receive it with serenity, because my spirit will live. I prefer death to chains.'

As he wrote, the pile of cigarette-ends grew and the cell was heavy with stale smoke; this was the one prison rule that had been relaxed in his favour, and his lawyers were allowed to bring him an unlimited supply of cigarettes from his daughter. Beyond the barred window the darkness gradually gave way to a grey dawn and he could soon distinguish the courtyard outside and the other prison block beyond it, and finally the stained, flaking walls of his own cell. Seven o'clock arrived, then eight o'clock and he began to realise that he would live another day.

At 8.30 two of his three defending counsel arrived : Jaffré, the youngest, eager and full of enthusiasm for Laval, the only one who had volunteered to defend him ; Naud, the senior, appointed by the head of the Paris Bar, a member of the Resistance, hating everything that Laval had stood for, yet horrified by the travesty of a trial which he had undergone. They found him nervous and agitated, drained of his former sardonic humour, his resilient, defiant spirit apparently broken.

Ever since the death sentence had been pronounced in the court from which both they and he had been absent, they had worked unceasingly for a retrial, citing the lack of opportunity for the accused to prepare his defence, the packed and hostile jury, the doubtful competence of the court. They knew it was an almost hopeless task and that the Provisional Government was determined that Laval should be shot before the nation went to the polls on 21 October. This morning they had to tell him that there was still no news from the Minister of Justice.

'In fact,' Laval said, 'it is all over.' It was a statement, not a question. They tried to assure him as well as they could that there was still hope, but they could see that the optimism that once seemed invincible had now deserted him.

He interrupted them to ask : 'Are there firing parties on Sunday ?'

Naud answered that he was sure there were not. 'Then it will be Monday,' Laval said. They remained silent, since there was no more to say.

They had agreed among themselves that they would not leave him alone until the last hour came. Turn and turn about, they sat with him, sometimes going through the tragic pretence of preparing new arguments to which nobody would listen, sometimes simply making conversation or more often listening to stories of his past life.

In the afternoon, when the third lawyer, Baraduc, arrived to take over, he found Laval completely composed again and deep in discussion of the potato harvest with one of the warders. Laval stretched himself out on the plank bed and, apropos of nothing, said : 'I believe in the transmutation of bodies. Does that surprise you ? I'm convinced there's a fellow living over again in me, a

Spaniard who lived at Chateldon in the fifteenth century. He was an extraordinary creature named Villandrando. He started from nothing, like me. He rose very high, too, though not as high as I did. And then he fell very low, but not quite as low as I have . . . Well, that's why I am unhappy that my daughter has no child. One day, centuries from now, there would have been a little Chambrun who would have been a phenomenal creature – and that would have been me.'

He smiled and lit another cigarette. Then his face became overcast again and, for the second time that day, he said: 'There's something I want to ask you: are there executions on Sundays?' Baraduc assured him that there were not. 'I don't want them to disfigure me,' Laval continued. 'Only the earth has that privilege.'

He went on talking, as if to himself, facing the prospect of death and discussing it. Now and then he would address a remark directly to Baraduc: 'My work is finished. Eternity is beginning for me. I am beginning it with you, this afternoon, in my last little *salon*.' He looked round the walls, grimaced and growled: 'And a very odd little *salon*.'

He seemed strangely contented. The only sound was the puff as he exhaled cigarette smoke. He began to talk again, about his childhood, murmuring to himself in such a low voice that Baraduc caught only stray sentences, such as 'I don't know if it will be possible, but I should very much like to be buried in my little church at Chateldon.' He was quite calm when Baraduc left him that night.

On Sunday, 14 October, Jaffré was the first to arrive and found Laval waiting for him in the interview room. They went back to Laval's cell. Jaffré told him there was still nothing to report and Laval nodded his head: 'If there were going to be a favourable decision, it would have been made already; and even if it had not been announced you would have had wind of it.' He asked Jaffré if shootings were carried out on Mondays, and Jaffré told him that, for administrative reasons, it had never happened in the past. 'In any case, we still have two more days at least,' Jaffré continued. 'De Gaulle and his Minister of Justice may be influenced by new pressures. The foreign Press is continuing to denounce the scandal of your trial. In France itself a lot of people are

indignant. Believe me, Monsieur le Président, all is not lost.'

Laval continued to nod his head, paying little attention to the lawyer's words. Then, suddenly, he repeated: 'You are sure that there are no executions on Mondays?' He was unimpressed by Jaffré's assurances. 'They can very well assassinate a man on a Monday when he's been tried in the way that I have been tried. My affair isn't like other people's affairs. There is no precedent for my case. You cannot find any analogy.'

He was in the same grim, pessimistic mood when Naud arrived a little later. 'Do they aim at the face?' he asked him unexpectedly.

'No, at the chest,' Naud replied. And then, to avoid the horror of this line of discussion: 'But why do you ask that? Perhaps at this very moment your life has been spared.'

'I wouldn't want them to shatter my face,' Laval continued. 'It's a pretty filthy one, eh? Isn't that what you think? Even so, I wouldn't want to be disfigured. If my wife and daughter should see it one day, I'd like them at least to be able to recognise it. It's the one they have loved. Do you think I could ask the favour of being shot in the chest?'

They were relieved at lunchtime by Baraduc, to whom Laval handed three envelopes: 'Here, this is for you – and this for Naud – and this for little Jaffré. You may read them.'

Baraduc realised that they were letters of farewell. Without extracting the letters he licked the gummed edges of the envelopes and sealed them. As he put them into his pocket he looked up and caught Laval's eyes on him and realised he had committed an appalling act of clumsiness.

'You don't want to read them?' Laval was smiling, but there was a catch in his voice. 'Well, then, read that.' It was the public statement, headed 'On the Eve of Death' that he had written two nights before.

Jaffré returned from lunch and Baraduc went back to Paris. There was no barrier between the death-cells and the rest of the first division block, and the prisoners who passed the cell on the way to confer with their lawyers stopped for a moment to greet Laval. To them he said: 'You come to see me because you know I am going to die. Bah! We must all die one day.' Others who knew

him better threw their arms round him and said: 'Courage, Président.'

'Don't worry about me,' he answered. 'I will show them how a French President of the Council dies.'

In Paris, shortly after their return, Naud and Baraduc had each received a telephone call: 'Maître, I am instructed to inform you that the execution of Pierre Laval will take place tomorrow morning. Rendezvous at 8 a.m. in front of the Palais de Justice. A car has been arranged for you.' Naud and Baraduc went straight to the Chambruns' flat in the Place du Palais-Bourbon, where Laval's wife was staying with his daughter and son-in-law. Their arrival together on a Sunday afternoon needed no explanation. 'It is tomorrow morning,' said Naud.

Mme Laval exclaimed: 'They are going through with this infamy!' Then, more quietly: 'My poor Pierre! My poor Pierre!'

'We are going to see him,' Naud said. Josée, her fierce spirit suddenly broken, murmured: 'Yes. Go and see him. Keep very close to him. Go . . .'

The autumn light was failing when the lawyers arrived at Fresnes. The prison governor was waiting for them in the courtyard. 'Above all, don't say anything to him,' he urged them. 'He is very calm. If you let him know that it is tomorrow, it will be terrible.' On this condition he let them enter the prison, though it was after visiting hours.

They saw at once that both Laval and Jaffré, who was waiting with Laval in the interview cell, were suspicious of this visit at such a late hour. Laval's eyes darted from one to the other. 'Well,' he said, 'this time it's decided?' He stared at Baraduc: 'You look very down in the mouth.'

'I'm worried,' said Baraduc, 'because we have heard nothing.'

Laval continued the long stare; then, abruptly, he became his old self, brisk, authoritative, determined.

'Right,' he said. 'If nothing is decided, then we haven't lost all hope. But we must be quick. We must contact de Gaulle, Léon Blum, Herriot, Mayer, Cachin, all the people I have known, everybody. They can't kill me like this. Quick, get some paper — I'll dictate. I refuse to die like this.'

He began to pace up and down the cell, his feet straddled apart.

Soon after the chains had been put on him he had learnt the death-block trick of tying a string to the centre link so that he could lift it, with an incongruous motion as if he were raising a skirt, and thus walk up and down without the dragging, clanking noise of the fetters. 'Reminds me of a sack race,' he had said with a grin. Now, in his enthusiasm, he forgot to pull up the thread, leaving the chain to trail behind him as he shuffled in his grotesque Chaplinesque way backwards and forwards, from wall to wall, pouring out a torrent of feverish phrases which Naud scribbled on to the paper while Baraduc interrupted, suggested alterations, playing his part as well as he could in the tragic make-believe.

It was soon too dark to see in the interview cell and there was no electric light. Laval asked the warder for permission to continue the visit in his own cell. As he shuffled off with a sheaf of documents under his arm, Jaffré came over to Naud. 'Is it tomorrow then?' he whispered. Naud nodded. 'We must tell him,' said Jaffré. Naud shook his head: 'We can't. We haven't the right. He knows well enough already.'

In his own cell, Laval immediately began his dictation again. Exhausted by the nervous strain of concealing the truth and by the sheer physical labour of writing at such speed, Naud passed the pen to Jaffré, and still the words poured from Laval's mouth. His voice grew hoarse and finally hesitant as the sheets of paper mounted on the table. It was a last gesture, a last recourse to his greatest weapon – argument. And he must have known as well as the other three that it was completely hopeless.

At last Naud pleaded that the hour was very late and that everything they had taken down would need to be collated and recopied before the morning. As they left, Laval gave each of them a longer, firmer handshake than usual, fixing them with his dark questioning eyes.

'Well, then, till tomorrow,' he said. 'Come early.'

'We shall be here at eight,' said Naud.

Laval's dark eyes gleamed under their heavy lids. 'The waiting-room isn't open until half past eight,' he said.

'Nevertheless,' Naud answered, 'we shall be here at eight.'

IN FACT, AT eight the following morning they were changing cars in the Place Dauphine, opposite the Palais de Justice. Boudot, the chauffeur who had driven Laval throughout the days of the Occupation and during his captivity in Germany, had come early to collect them. 'I owe it to the boss,' he had said. 'It's at least something I can do for him before he dies.' He was a stolid ex-policeman with a wry sense of humour. 'There are only two things you mustn't ask the governor for – money and cigarettes,' he had once told them. This morning he was not smoking and seemed close to tears.

They got into the car that had been allotted them and the small procession drove off: the Attorney-General in his massive limousine, the Prefect of Police in a large American car, the Black Maria that had been used to take Laval to and from the truncated enquiries in the Palais-Bourbon, and a police radio car. They drove up the Boulevard Saint-Michel and, as they passed through the Porte d'Orléans and into the southern suburbs, the passers-by began to turn their heads, recognising the sinister cortège. They turned eastward at the Croix de Berny, and from here onwards all the crossroads were blocked by armed police.

The cars drew together outside the prison, waiting for the main gates to be opened. Inside, the prison governor received the party without a word and led them to the condemned cells, the front of the building now concealed by an immense black screen. They formed into a straggling procession and began to walk down the pink-washed corridor, their footsteps echoing in the unnatural silence. All the cell-doors had been locked and the judas-holes closed; the morning meal had not been distributed. The prisoners sat motionless in their cells and for once the insistent clinking of their chains was still.

They turned to the left and closed up on each other as they approached Laval's cell. Two warders stood on each side of the cell-door; on a hanger hooked on to a nail on the corridor wall was

Laval's striped blue suit – the clothes that he was to be shot in.

One of the warders opened the cell-door and stood back. From the doorway, the Attorney-General, Mornet, pronounced the ritual words: 'Pierre Laval, be brave!'

Laval was lying on his right side, facing the wall. As his lawyers entered they saw him huddle deeper into the bed, as if refusing to leave it.

Naud, horrified by this apparent cowardice and foreseeing a dreadful scene in which Laval would be dragged howling to the execution, strode over and tapped him sharply on the shoulder. 'Monsieur le Président,' he said, 'for your lawyers, for history – be brave.'

Laval replied: 'You don't have to say that sort of thing to me.' He raised the blanket with his left arm, pulling it over his head, and Naud shouted: 'I beg you, sir, have a little dignity! There is nothing left for you now but to die well!'

Laval turned his head towards the room and for the first time they could see that the tricolour sash, his badge of office as Mayor of Aubervilliers, was draped around his neck. His eyes were glassy and gurgling noises came from his open mouth. His left hand sagged over the side of the bed and from his relaxed fingers a glass phial tinkled on to the floor.

Dr Paul, the medical expert, hurried across, picked up the phial, put it to his nose and at once announced: 'Cyanide.' He ordered nurses to be sent for and examined the body that was knotted with pain on the bed. Raising one arm, he felt the pulse and announced: 'He has only a few minutes left.'

The officials looked at each other in consternation; the accustomed rhythm of the execution had been broken and for a moment nobody knew what to do. In this sudden suspension of all movement, Naud caught sight of two sheets of paper lying on the hinged table at the side of the cell. He picked them up and read them aloud. The first, addressed to his gaolers, contained Laval's thanks for their humanity and understanding. In the second he had written:

'I no longer have any doubt about the fate that awaits me.

'General de Gaulle has not hesitated to order my assassination. This is not an execution, since the order that condemns me is not a

judgment. They closed my mouth at the trial; they wish to extinguish my voice for ever. Thus they will no longer fear my words.

'I addressed a supreme appeal to two politicians whose lives I have saved: Léon Blum and Paul Reynaud. It was in vain.

'I do not accept the sentence. I do not accept the defilement of an execution, for this is murder. I intend to die in my own way, by poison, in the Roman fashion. It is my last act of protest against savagery.'

He explained that the poison he used was one that he had kept with him for many months, sometimes hidden in his overcoat and sometimes in his brief-case.

'I ask that I should be left my tricolour sash. I wish to keep it for the great journey.

'My voice will have been successfully silenced for ever, but my spirit will be born again, more vigorous than ever. I address my last salute to France, whom I have served. My last thought is for her.'

Dr Paul straightened himself up from the bed and announced: 'This man's vitality is extraordinary. His pulse is non-existent, yet from time to time there seems to be a flicker of life.'

The Attorney-General looked at Dr Paul and said: 'He must have treatment,' but Paul turned away in disgust, muttering: 'I conduct autopsies on the dead; I don't treat the living.'

The prison doctor and some nuns from the prison infirmary had arrived and Mornet repeated his instructions that Laval must be revived if possible. Laval's body was stripped for injections; the sweat that poured from him had glued the greying lock of hair to his forehead above the drained face and turned-up eyes; he writhed from side to side as the poison fought against the antidotes; the rattling gasps of his breathing echoed out of the door and along the corridor and ceased only when a rubber tube was thrust down his throat.

While the medical attendants poured litre after litre of water down the tube, the Attorney-General, the examining magistrate and the colonel in charge of the firing party went off to telephone General de Gaulle's office in the Rue Saint-Dominique. Inside the cell, the commissioner of police from Choisy and four inspectors

were questioning the three lawyers, suspecting, despite what Laval had written – or perhaps because of it – that one of the lawyers had smuggled the poison into the prison.

Mornet returned to the cell and announced the decision from de Gaulle's office: if the condemned man was not already dead, the sentence was to be carried out as soon as possible. The stomach-pumping continued – there were to be seventeen in all – and the air was contaminated with a dreadful stench as the vomit overflowed from the basins on to the floor. While the doctors, orderlies and nuns worked on the body, an altercation broke out on the other side of the cell.

'He is not juridically dead; his heart has begun beating again,' said Mornet, anxious to carry out the instructions that he had just received by telephone. 'I must therefore have the death sentence carried out. Do you not think that, out of humanity, it would be preferable to do so immediately? We can tie Laval to a stretcher and prop that up against the post. He will be shot without any further suffering.'

Naud turned on him bitterly: 'Your care for humanity does you credit, sir. All that I will say is, if you do this, I will see that the whole world hears about it. My opinion is that, if Laval is to die in front of a firing squad, it must be when he is in full possession of his senses and his self-control.'

'I suggested it only from a sense of humanity,' Mornet protested.

'I am extremely touched on my client's behalf,' Naud replied. 'And on his behalf I thank you.'

The argument was cut short by Dr Paul. 'You have no authority to carry out an execution in such conditions,' he told Mornet. 'The Penal Code forbids you to execute any man who is not in a fit condition to make a final statement about his crime.'

By 10.30, after two hours' work, the doctors had managed to bring Laval back to consciousness. To avoid further delay, the firing party that was waiting at the Fort de Montrouge was ordered to come to Fresnes so that the execution could be carried out in the prison grounds. Laval was heard to say: 'I did not want to be killed by French bullets.' He continued to murmur, but the

words were indistinguishable. Baraduc, bending over him, guessed that he was asking for a priest.

The prison chaplain, with whom Laval had often joked about his lack of faith during the past week, leaned over the bed on which Laval was now propped up in a half-sitting position and said: 'Monsieur le Président, this is perhaps the moment to pray and to ask God for forgiveness of your sins.' In a harsh whisper, Laval answered: 'Yes,' and then, with a flash of his old defiance, added: 'It would be a good thing if the others asked God's forgiveness, too.'

His peace made with God, he laboriously dictated a short statement to the commissioner of police, affirming that he had had the poison in his possession since 1942. The corner of his mouth was sagging with the onset of partial paralysis and his hand shook as he signed the statement.

He asked for a drink. Despite the vast amount of water that had been poured into him and that he had spewed out into the basins, he was racked with thirst. He retched and shuddered continuously, and each time that the supporting hands left him he fell back on the bed.

A warder brought in the blue-striped suit on the hanger and a nun, raising first one of Laval's legs and then the other, began to slide on his pants and socks and trousers. 'If God sees us at this moment,' she said, 'He cannot be proud of us.' The Prefect of Police wheeled round and said: 'We need no comments from you.' 'I have only one master,' replied the nun, 'who is in Heaven.'

While he was being clothed, Laval again asked for a drink. They gave him water and lemon juice, sweetened with sugar, and, as he swilled it round in the prison mug, the director of prison services burst into the cell. 'Get him dressed quickly! No more fooling about!' he ordered.

Laval had been trying to button his braces, though he was still so dazed that a moment before he had asked for his trousers, not knowing that he already had them on. His voice suddenly strengthened and, eyeing the man from head to foot, he growled: 'Are you in such a hurry for your lunch? Can't you give me five minutes to become decent again?' He turned to the others. 'Is my

hair brushed? Am I wearing my white tie?' They found the last of the famous white ties in one of the hold-alls and tied it for him. He combed his hair himself, with the aid of a hand-mirror that Baraduc held. He asked for his hat, but this they could not find. He had another drink and was immediately sick.

It was midday. The cell was emptying now and the cortège was forming in the corridor: the Attorney-General, the examining magistrate, the Prefect of Police, the director of prison services, the medical expert, a dozen other officials and two policemen holding a chair between them.

'The policemen will carry you,' Mornet said. Laval shook his head: 'My lawyers are young and strong: they will help me to walk.' Supported on his right hand by Naud and on his left by Baraduc, followed by Jaffré carrying a bottle of water and a glass, he began to shuffle painfully along the corridor.

Whereas Pierre Laval is accused of the double crime of plotting against the security of the State and of intelligence with the enemy;

On the first count:

Whereas it appears, as much from the proceedings of the preliminary enquiry as from the evidence at this trial, wilfully disturbed by the accused, that Pierre Laval did, without doubt, take an active part in enterprises, intrigues and manoeuvres which resulted, on 10 July 1940 and following days, in the eviction of the legal Government of France;

That it was under his direction that French policy, by the application of constitutional measures promulgated by Pétain with his consent, took on daily a more dictatorial and anti-republican trend . . .

Laval shuffled to a standstill and the long train of officials behind him halted while Jaffré came to his side and poured some water from the bottle. He drank eagerly and handed back the glass. Then, as the water hit his tortured stomach, a spasm folded him in half and, held by Naud and Baraduc, he vomited on the floor of the corridor. He gasped for breath, then straightened himself and the procession moved on.

On the second count :

Whereas from July 1940 until 13 December of the same year Laval unceasingly served the cause of Germany, allowing our enemies to retake Alsace-Lorraine despite the armistice convention;

Attempting, from the first and in order to gratify our conquerors, to adapt our institutions to those of their country;

Preparing and effecting the interview at Montoire where, under the name of 'collaboration', Pétain inaugurated a policy of submission to Hitler . . .

Again Laval halted and turned to ask Jaffré for water. He was to do it seven times before he reached the Black Maria that waited at the prison door – seven times until the simple, horrible routine was imprinted on the minds of those who followed him : the eager gulping of the water, the immediate nausea and spasmodic doubling of the body, the echoing splash and retch.

Whereas it has been established that it was under pressure from Germany that he was brought back to power on 18 April 1942;

That in this new phase of his official activity he increasingly put his authority at the service of that same power . . .

Scuttling of the fleet at Toulon; handing over of our merchant navy to Germany; massive deportation of workers, placed at the disposal of Germany to aid her in her military effort, under the false pretext of liberating our prisoners . . .

Naud climbed into the Black Maria, then turned and dragged Laval up by his arms while Baraduc pushed from behind. The two policemen who had halted and advanced, halted and advanced in their humble section of the procession, still carrying the chair between them, slid it into the van and Laval collapsed on it, his head bowed over his hands. The chaplain stood beside him with his arm around his shoulders. A young doctor got in, carrying a hypodermic syringe in case he needed further reviving.

The door was slammed and the van began to move. Laval

raised his head and Naud could see there were tears in his eyes. 'I am sad for my wife and my daughter,' he said. . . .

Whereas this pro-German activity resulted not only in the above acts . . . but was widely disseminated in circulars, addresses, interviews, drawn up or given by Laval at this period, of which it is sufficient to cite the more characteristic ones :

'I wish for the victory of Germany' (22 June 1942);

'I am certain of German victory' (22 November 1942);

'I desire a German victory' (15 December 1942);

That, without proceeding to a long enumeration of facts established by innumerable documents and not denied in any material particular, it is permissible to conclude that Laval willingly and wittingly placed his influence at the service of a country with which, despite the suspension of hostilities in June 1940, we were still in a state of war . . .

The van came to a halt and Laval was helped to the ground. The firing party was already in position. In front of them, outlined against the prison wall, a post stood between two poplars. Beyond the squad of soldiers stood the hearse, the coffin and the undertaker's men. Laval turned to the colonel in charge of the firing party.

'May I give the order to fire?' he asked.

'No,' the colonel replied. 'It is forbidden by the regulations. A military command is necessary in your own interest, so that all the soldiers fire at the same time and you do not suffer.'

'Very well,' said Laval.

Whereas he pleads that, whatever may be the appearances, he pursued the only policy which was then in conformity with our interests . . .

That nothing in the preliminary investigation, nor in the course of the trial, has made it apparent that France has received any advantage whatsoever from Laval's actions;

That she has, on the contrary, through his actions, incurred the risk . . . of presenting a humiliated and submissive

appearance from which she might, and from which she still may, suffer damaging consequences . . .

He stared around him searchingly, and then asked: 'Where are the magistrates?' His lawyers repeated the question and a moment later Mornet and the examining magistrate appeared from behind the hearse and approached him, hats in hand.

'I only wanted to tell you,' Laval said, 'that you have my pity for having consented to carry out such a task. You desired this spectacle. Very well! Accept it to the end.'

Whereas from all these facts there results proof against Laval of the crimes above specified:

The Court,

In accordance with article 87 and 75 of the Penal Code, and the statute of 18 November 1944,

Condemns Laval to the penalty of death,

Declares him convicted of national indignity,

And in consequence condemns him to national degradation and orders the confiscation of his property . . .

Laval turned to the soldiers. 'As for you, I am sorry that you should be the innocent accomplices of a political crime. I die because I have loved my country too well. I ask you to aim at my heart.'

The chair had been brought from the van and placed at the foot of the post. Laval refused to sit in it. 'A President of the Council of France dies on his feet,' he said. 'I will gather whatever strength remains to me for the moment that is required.'

His hands were tied, but his request that he should not be blindfolded was granted. His lawyers stepped forward to offer him a final embrace and to Naud he said: 'To you, Naud, man of the Resistance, I wish to say one thing before I die: my love for my country was as great as yours.' They helped him into position against the roughly-hewn wooden plank that a convict had set up an hour or two before. When they had moved back out of range, Laval called to them: 'Stay where you are, so that I may see you as I die: you have good faces.'

A sergeant-major had left the firing squad and now stood on a chair to the right of them. He gave the command: 'Aim!'

As the rifles pointed at him, Laval shouted: '*Vive la France!*' The volley echoed back from the wall. His body folded in half for the last time; his paralysed right leg buckled under him and he collapsed on the ground.

The sergeant-major ran forward with a heavy-calibre revolver and fired the *coup de grâce* into his left temple. The blood flowed over his face and across the tricolour sash.

SUCCESS STORY

[1]

IN THE CENTRE of France, at the foot of the northern slopes of the mountains of the Auvergne, the village of Chateldon has been slowly wasting away for seven centuries. Early in the Middle Ages there were tanneries and cutleries beside the two swift-flowing streams that pass through the village on their way to join the River Allier. But the Black Death swept through Chateldon and those craftsmen who escaped it settled in Thiers, a dozen miles away to the south. The remaining villagers returned to growing hemp on the plain and vines on the mountain slopes, and raising cattle on the uplands. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the gentry came to take the waters at the mineral springs along the valley, but this trade, too, was gradually lost to Vichy in the north.

The western road out of the village runs through flat arable land, pasture and woods to join the main road from Vichy to Thiers three miles away. On an eminence dominating the roads that lead into the village from the hills to the south and west stands the château, heavily restored in a variety of styles since it was first built in the twelfth century. Below the château, facing the main square, was the village inn and here, shortly before ten o'clock on the morning of 28 June 1883, was born Pierre-Jean-Marie Laval, fourth and last child of Baptiste and Claudine Laval. He was born with a caul – a sure protection against death by drowning.

His father, from whom he inherited his energy and appetite for

work, combined a butcher's shop with the business of the inn and, in his spare time, conducted the carrier service to the railway station that served both Ris and Chateldon. Baptiste Laval was a grim, dour man, always driving himself and his family, grudging them both recognition and affection. The boy's mother, from whom he inherited his strangely dark skin and heavy features, was a placid, kindly, devout woman, with flashing black eyes, a fleshy nose and thick lips – a throw-back perhaps to some Moorish invader of long ago.

Though the Lavals earned their hard-won living from trade, it was in a peasant family and in a peasant atmosphere that the stocky, ugly little boy grew up. The villagers tramped out each morning to till the fields, tend the cattle or hump great hods of steaming manure to the vineyards and in the evening came to the inn to drink and play cards and collect the packages that the elder Laval had brought in on the carrier wagon. Like Pierre's paternal grandfather, most of them could neither read nor write and therefore talked the more. From his earliest days the boy learned to express himself better in speech than in writing.

He was an intelligent child, keeping his place without difficulty at the top of his class in the village school above the *mairie*, dominating his companions with his will as well as his flailing arms. He played hard and played to win; if necessary, as in the Sunday afternoon games of quoits, altering the rules if the luck turned against him.

Like the rest of his family, he earned his keep, serving in the bar and delivering meat to the castle or to the village's most prominent family, the Claussats. M. Claussat was not only *maire* of Chateldon but also a member of the General Council of the Department. There were books in his house and these he later lent to the young Laval.

His temper was violent and uncertain. The other children, mocking his sallow skin and heavy-lidded eyes, would cry 'Jamaican' after him and then have to run for their lives as he came at them, head down and fists swinging. He had a taste for crude practical jokes and despite severe punishments – as when he caught a fox and let it loose in his uncle's poultry run – he remained stubborn and rebellious.

He led a gang of children that was a perpetual source of misery to the *garde champêtre*, and his relations with the church were brief and stormy. To please his mother, and because he rather enjoyed swaggering in the short red cassock, he became a choirboy, but scandalised the priest by drinking the communion wine when he should have been polishing the communion plate.

In the hope of reforming by kindness where severity had failed, the priest gave him the honour of carrying the crucifix during a ceremonial procession through the village. Unhappily it was a day when sunshine had followed heavy showers and the boy soon forgot his dignity in the delight of stepping into every large puddle that came his way. The splashes of dirty water that fell on those around him brought a sharp reproof from Sister Angélique. Furious at receiving a scolding in public, and from a nun, he kept a sharp look-out for the next big puddle in the road and then jumped into it with both feet. Sister Angélique promptly boxed his ears. The small boy, his dark face flushed with anger, propped the crucifix against the wall and yelled: 'Carry it yourself, then!' He saluted Sister Angélique and much that she represented with his fingers to his nose before marching off to the church and depositing his cassock.

At eleven he gained his certificate of primary studies and the following year he left school. There was plenty of work for him in the family business, his principal job being to drive the carrier cart along the rather dull, flat road to Route Nationale No. 106, where he turned right and continued for another couple of kilometres to the Gare de Ris. The journey could be uncomfortably hot in summer and uncomfortably cold in winter; above all, it was boring and without a future. As the youngest son of three, he had not much hope of inheriting any worthwhile part of his father's business.

He was determined not to spend his life in Chateldon; the problem was how to get away. Most of the boys who left the village went to Vichy, where they took jobs in the hotels, or perhaps ventured as far as Paris where the Auvergnats, usually unskilled in city trades, were familiar as coal-merchants, roast-chestnut-sellers, pedlars and rag-and-bone men. If he was to do better than this, he must first pass the higher State examinations;

with the help of the long-suffering *curé*, Father Peloux, and the village schoolmistress, Mlle Morlet, he began to study the subjects required for the *baccalauréat*.

He read while the horse jogged along the road, the reins tied round the brake-handle or stuck under his seat. At night he kept the candle burning after he had gone to bed and continued reading. First he memorised the chapter headings, then the chapter summaries, then skipped through the text, never reading for pleasure, only for the one purpose: to pass the examination that would qualify him for entry to a university.

The help that he received from his village preceptors, though willingly given, was quite insufficient to get him through the examination: some English from Mlle Morlet, some Latin from the *curé*; but neither of them was competent to guide him through the set books in literature, the higher flights of history, physics and geometry. These he could study only in a *lycée* in one of the big towns; and his father, unyielding, tight-fisted and perfectly satisfied with the success he himself had won in his native village, saw no reason to draw on his savings to send the boy away to school.

For nearly three years Pierre continued to study both day and night, but with increasing hopelessness. He was past fifteen, and almost too old to be admitted to the course, when his mother finally persuaded his father to let the boy go to the *lycée* at Moulins.

After a year at Moulins he went to Bayonne, where he could stay with his sister, who was married to a soldier. He passed the first part of his *baccalauréat*, without particular distinction, at Bordeaux in 1901, soon after his eighteenth birthday, and the second part a year later. He was now qualified to read for a university degree.

Lacking any bursary or financial support from his father – a handicap that he often referred to proudly in after life – he got himself a job as an usher at the Lycée Saint-Rambert at Lyon and then at the Lycée Ampère, where a future political rival, Edouard Herriot, was already teaching. For his university degree he chose natural history, possibly regarding it as an easier subject for a country boy. His studies were interrupted by compulsory military

training with the 105th Infantry Regiment at Riom and the 92nd at Clermont-Ferrand (from which he was invalided out because of varicose veins), and by a constant change of schools. During these years he moved from Lyon to Autun, then to Saint-Etienne, then to Dijon and finally to Paris.

As an usher, his duties were not to teach but to supervise the pupils at their work, in their recreation periods and in the dormitory. The hours of work compelled him to miss many of the lectures that full-time students could attend and the eagerness of the boys to rag their bear-leader threatened to interfere with his studies at other times. But he had learned to control his violent temper and to rely on his innate gift for negotiation.

The circumstances in which he achieved this considerable victory over his natural temperament are obscure. Somewhere along the road from Chateldon he had been involved in a fight sufficiently serious to be brought before the courts. The husband or lover (accounts vary) of a schoolmistress on whom Laval had been calling very frequently met him one day on the stairs as he was leaving her. Relying on both his seniority and his superior height and weight, the man ordered Laval to take his cap off. Laval, colouring up immediately, refused to do anything of the kind; whereupon the husband or lover boxed his ears.

Blind with rage, Laval leaped up two stairs to bring him level with his opponent and rained a flurry of blows on him. 'A friend had been teaching me a bit of boxing,' he said when he told the story afterwards, 'and I remembered a bit of advice he had given me: "Keep on punching at the same spot - to prevent the bruise from swelling."' Both of them were badly marked in the encounter, but Laval presented his case so persuasively when they appeared in court that he was let off with a caution while his opponent received most of the blame.

But it seems probable that some more serious and more ugly incident than this occurred some time in his early life to produce in him the horror of violence that became one of his most marked characteristics. It was a horror so profound that it seems to have been directed to something within himself, for he never showed fear of others and his courage, both physical and moral, was never questioned by unprejudiced observers.

Whatever the reason, confronted with a muttering group of boys in the classroom and an unruly mob in the dormitory, he controlled his temper, summoned the ringleader, and offered to negotiate.

'There's no point in each plaguing the other,' he said. 'I am a man of compromise: I will offer you one. If you and the others continue to cause a commotion during study periods, you will prevent me from preparing for my own examinations. In that case, I shall treat you unmercifully and hand you out hours, days and months of detention.'

'On the other hand, if you leave me to work peacefully during study periods and sleep peacefully in the dormitory, I'll be a friend to you. I'll close my eyes to any other breaches of discipline. I'll let you smoke in corners and even climb out over the wall if you're smart enough not to be caught by other members of the staff. And I'll make you another proposition: if any of you is willing to help me by hearing me repeat my lessons, I'll help him with his. One good turn deserves another, eh? Have a cigarette?'

He obtained his degree in natural science, but had already set his sights higher than becoming a schoolteacher. He decided to become a lawyer and embarked on the course of study for this new set of examinations. He had also become interested in politics. In Saint-Etienne, a friend took him to a meeting of the Socialist Party and, excited by the humanitarian visions of the people he met there and the success that he won in their local debates, he joined the Party in 1903, at the age of twenty.

He took his final Bar exam in Paris in 1909 and on 20 October that year he married. He had kept his roots in Chateldon, returning there in the holidays to work at the inn and to discuss politics with one of the Claussat boys, Joseph, who later became a Socialist deputy. It was Joseph's sister, Eugénie, whom Laval married: a sturdy, rather plain girl with great strength of character. It could have been a marriage of ambition: the little local boy who proves his success by marrying the mayor's daughter. In fact, it was a marriage of deep affection and devotion, a union that was to bring them almost unalloyed happiness.

They returned to Paris and took a flat – with one room to serve

as office – at 64 Rue du Faubourg Saint-Martin, a long, dreary thoroughfare running from the Porte Saint-Martin northwards past the Gare de l'Est: a working-class district where he could hope to get business from his fellow trade unionists.

The flat was on the first floor of a narrow old building, flanked on one side by a cobbler's and on the other by a tripe-shop. On the floor above was a former solicitor's clerk, who carried on business as a public scribe and money-lender; on the floor below was a dentist, who pulled teeth at three francs a time; across the narrow landing on the steep spiral staircase was a midwife. For his income Laval depended on dock briefs and on work for three established lawyers for whom he devilled in turn: Maître Millet, Maître Ernest Lafont, and Maître Chesné. They handed him the more troublesome or less interesting, and certainly less lucrative, cases and he worked at them with unabating energy.

He was a striking young man, not entirely ugly now, with a sense of smouldering fire behind the near-Asiatic features, a black moustache drooping down on either side of his very thick lips, fierce dark eyes above the full, slightly curved nose, a dark swathe of oily hair hanging over his left temple. He was a dramatic figure in his black gown and white jabot, yet the most undramatic of advocates.

Even in the Chamber and the Senate he disliked mounting the tribune, and would simply rise in his seat to address the assembly or, at most, walk out to the foot of the tribune and speak from there. With his left hand buried in his jacket pocket and his right hand thrusting home his points, he had none of the flowing actions of classical oratory. In the Chamber, and even more in the Senate, he was considered to 'lack elegance'.

Often accepting as little as two francs for a consultation, he built up a growing clientèle of trade unionists, beginning with the furniture-removers and adding to them the hat-makers, the post-office employees, the gut-dressers from the abattoirs at La Villette. He also amassed an impressive range of law books to furnish his office, but did not pay a great deal of attention to their contents. 'My method depends on art rather than science,' he would say with a grin.

Whenever possible, he would keep the case out of court, talk

and talk and talk again until he had arrived at an acceptable solution. 'Arbitration,' he insisted, 'arbitration — everybody gets something out of that.'

At La Villette a recognised perquisite of the men who slaughtered and dressed the animals was *la petite viande*, the glands and other minor bits and pieces. But in cutting them out there was a temptation to let the knife run wide, and the employers eventually prosecuted one of the men for stealing meat. It was Laval, the butcher's son from Chateldon, who got the job of defending the man, and with him all his fellow-workers who ran a similar risk of prosecution; and Laval won.

The case that finally established his reputation with the trade unionists came to him while he was working for Maître Chesné. The left wing of the Socialist Party had long been preaching direct action, violent resistance to the State in order to force reforms; and, far beyond the left wing, on a lunatic plane of their own, the anarchists had been putting their own version of this into operation, bringing terror to Paris and much of the surrounding countryside by their often motiveless outrages, sabotage raids and murders.

One of the rare occasions when the police caught up with a gang of saboteurs in the act of cutting telegraph cables and unbolting railway lines was at Choisy-le-Roi, just outside Paris on the main line to Orléans. In a running pistol fight, the saboteurs escaped, but under the railway bridge at Choisy the police found a man in soiled clothing, bloodstained and stretched out among a mass of broken bottles. Near him was a partially discharged revolver and a pair of wire-cutters that bore traces of copper.

The man turned out to be named Manès, a taxi-driver by trade and an anarchist by conviction. Searching his rooms, the police found a collection of anarchist pamphlets and, nailed to the wall, a photograph of a man whom they identified as Bakunin, the Russian anarchist. Beneath it was written: 'To vanquish the enemies of the proletariat we must destroy and keep on destroying, for the destructive spirit is at the same time the constructive spirit', a slogan which Manès evidently regarded as both inspiring and intelligible.

Manès claimed that he had been drinking all the morning and

in the afternoon must have fallen down where he was found, cutting himself on the broken bottles. He added that he knew nothing of the attempted sabotage nor where the revolver and wire-cutters had come from.

It was not often that an anarchist was tracked down and the preliminary enquiries were conducted in a blaze of newspaper publicity. When the case was set for trial at the assize court, Manès's family and the representatives of his union asked Maître Chesné to defend him. Chesné, whose mother had recently been killed in a train crash caused by sabotage, refused on the grounds that he was too upset by his mother's death and that the prosecution, knowing the circumstances, might make use of it against the accused.

Laval, who had been present at the conference, said: 'Let me handle it. I guarantee to get him acquitted.' After some hesitation Manès's representatives agreed and went into an adjoining room with Laval to discuss the defence. When they had finished, one of them asked Laval what his fee would be. 'Nothing,' said Laval.

At the trial the police made a great deal of the weapons that had been found near Manès and the fact that he had been captured so near to the scene of the crime; but they made even more of the portrait of Bakunin, the proof of motive, on which French law placed such great importance. Laval allowed the evidence to pass without question and it was not until the prosecution had completed its case that he rose to prove that the 'Bakunin' of the incriminating portrait was in fact nobody more sinister than Manès's aged father.

Speaking in his measured, reasonable, man-to-sensible-man fashion, he asked the jury if they could really be satisfied with this sort of investigation. If the police were so hopelessly inaccurate on one point, how much faith could one put in the others? Was this the sort of evidence on which to convict a man accused of so serious a crime?

It was not. The jury acquitted Manès and the trade unionists opened a subscription that raised several thousand francs to recompense Laval for the fee that he had refused.

In fact he had earned much more than a few thousand francs

by that day's work in court. His name was now well known. More trade-union business flowed to him, including the legal representation of the cab-drivers' union, which was alone worth ten thousand francs a year. He was in demand in the provinces and, when the Socialists of the Gironde invited him to Bordeaux to defend trade-unionist sailors, he took with him for the first time, as well as his wife, his small daughter, Josée. She had been born in 1911, an intelligent, vivacious child in whom her father's dark and heavy features had been fined down to a striking attractiveness; she grew up in an atmosphere of undiluted admiration from her parents, their only child.

Laval appreciated the value of newspaper publicity in furthering his career and, when the trade unionists founded their daily paper, *La Bataille Syndicaliste*, he took over the legal column and went three days a week to the newspaper office to give free consultations to its readers. His usual fee had now risen to 50 francs in Paris, 100 in the suburbs and 150 in the provinces.

[2]

HIS POLITICAL CAREER had been progressing side by side with his rise in the law-courts. Just before Josée was born he had stood as Socialist candidate in the working-class suburb of Boulogne-Billancourt on the western rim of Paris, but was defeated on the second count. In the spring of 1914 he moved clockwise round the 'Red Belt' to the constituency of Aubervilliers-Villemomble, once a centre of market-gardening but by this time a dingy district of factories and sweated workers.

He fought the election as an extreme left-winger, preaching pacifism and parliamentary reform. 'The Senate is one of the greatest obstacles to progress,' proclaimed one of his posters. 'Suppress it!' 'The bourgeoisie has no men left!' he cried in the course of one speech. 'It is forced to go and seek them in the dustbins where the Socialist Party throws its rubbish.' Both statements were to cause him some embarrassment later when he first left the Socialist Party and then entered the Senate.

As in everything else, he fought with great energy, addressing

meetings at every opportunity while his wife, with little Josée, went visiting hospitals and maternity homes. On voting day he strode up and down the pavement outside the polling stations, greeting and shaking hands with the electors as they came along. 'Take them aside for a little chat,' he used to say. 'It's the most important last-minute job. And the candidate must do it himself – nobody else can do it for him.'

On the first count, with four candidates, he gained nearly twice as many votes as his nearest opponent, a Nationalist, but failed to get the necessary over-all majority. On the second count, on 11 May 1914, he was elected, at thirty the youngest deputy in the Socialist Party – 'the Benjamin of our parliamentary group,' as *l'Humanité* called him.

Benjamin made a quiet start to his parliamentary career and for the first two years not much was heard of him. His varicose veins excused him from call-up for military service when war broke out in August, and the good offices of the Minister of the Interior saved him from being interned with other Socialists named in the *Carnet B* – the list of 'dangerous agitators and pacifists' drawn up by the army's *Deuxième Bureau*. Nevertheless the military authorities kept a close eye on him and in 1917 sent the Minister of the Interior a report alleging that Laval was saying things in the parliamentary lobbies which 'are not the words of a good Frenchman and which provoke the indignation of patriots. He violently attacks the Higher Command, accusing it of slowness in action and paucity of results. He does not hide his intention to express his sentiments from the tribune.' Laval was never to be popular with the army.

His attitude to the war was clear: he wanted it stopped, but until it was stopped he wanted it conducted with efficiency. His horror of violence and his hatred of waste were both passionately aroused. He attacked the Government for its lack of concern about the needs of the civilian population and, in the harsh winter of 1916–17, harried the Minister of Supplies, Edouard Herriot, his former superior in the *lycée* at Lyon, on the shortage of coal.

Herriot, already something of a heavyweight in the Radical-Socialist Party and not accustomed to being baited by newcomers, insisted that everything possible was being done. With

one of his favourite big-hearted gestures, he added: 'If I could, I would go and unload the barges myself!' 'Don't add ridicule to inefficiency,' snapped Laval.

By the spring of 1917 France had lost one man for every minute since the war began. One of Mme Laval's brothers had died at Verdun; Laval's elder brother, Jean, had been killed on the Meuse; there would eventually be the names of eight Lavals inscribed on the monument to the dead in the village square at Chateldon. And France still continued to bleed to death.

The pacifist wing of the Socialist Party, at first in a considerable minority, grew in strength as the war went on. Laval supported its attempts to arrive at a negotiated peace and applauded the conferences held in Switzerland between French and German Socialists to try to arrive at a compromise. He was frequently seen in the company of extremists on whom the police were keeping a close watch, including, until his expulsion from Paris in September 1916, an exiled Russian agitator named Léon Trotsky.

In the Chamber he attacked Poincaré and the Russian alliance: 'Without Russia we should not be at war; Russia has betrayed France.' At meetings in Aubervilliers he repeated the charges against the Government: 'France cannot throw her own share of the blame on Russia. She must blame those who govern her. They have shamelessly gambled, win or lose, and they have squandered French blood . . . Our people have been offered up in a holocaust because of the fever of revenge and the delirium of expansionism.'

In April 1917 the horror of the blood-bath into which Nivelle launched his troops with a new and again unsuccessful offensive brought waves of revulsion throughout France. Strikes broke out in the munition factories; women threw themselves in front of the trains taking more men to be slaughtered at the front; and in the trenches the soldiers mutinied. Laval agitated for amnesties for the mutineers, and at the front General Pétain, a regular soldier whose career had been undistinguished to the point of mediocrity until he had made his name famous in the dogged defence of Verdun, dealt with the mutineers with a clemency that was rare in the French army.

In Russia, the first revolution had broken out and the French Socialists were invited to send representatives to an international conference in Stockholm to discuss the possibilities of peace. In a secret session of the Chamber early in July Laval pleaded that the French delegates should be granted passports to go to Stockholm.

'We are not here to tell lies to ourselves or to coin brilliant aphorisms on the courage of France. Let us admit exactly what exists: in France there is war-weariness and a tide in favour of peace.'

He dwelt on the plight of the civilians and on a recent incident in the Paris suburbs when women who tried to get into a shop in search of bread had been shot down by Annamese soldiers. 'Whether you like it or not, a great hope has been born, a wind of peace is blowing across the countryside.' But the Chamber remained hostile. One right-wing deputy rose and shouted amid applause: 'Do you think that France is afraid? We will have no shameful peace!'

Laval asked if he preferred the prospect of the civil war that now threatened them. Either the Government would have to take the risk of using the army against civilians 'or it must find the best means of restoring public morale in this great country. And the means of giving hope to the troops and confidence to the working population, whether you like it or not, is Stockholm. . . .' Raising his voice, he proclaimed: 'We must go to Stockholm because we are sure of our cause! To Stockholm at the appeal of the Russian Revolution! To Stockholm for peace! Stockholm is our polar star!' His enthusiasm had betrayed him; he was not made for this sort of oratory. The deputies shrugged their shoulders. The passports were not granted.

His energy and the courage with which he persisted in the face of a hostile Chamber; the determination with which, while clamouring for peace, he performed his duties on the Parliamentary War Commission: these were not lost on the fiery, ruthless 'Tiger' Clemenceau, who came to power in November 1917. Clemenceau's policy was simple: '*Je fais la guerre!*' He recognised that Laval ('we make war to get peace'), though pacifist, was not defeatist. He offered him an under-secretaryship

in the new Cabinet. But the Socialists had forbidden any of their members to take office under Clemenceau; Laval, for the first and last time in his life, bowed to party discipline, though he did not remain silent under it.

'By this error of tactics,' he told them, 'you will change the political direction of this country for at least twenty years. Clemenceau will form his Cabinet despite you; he will remain in power; he will finish the war and he will win it!' He did. On 2 November 1919, the Chamber ratified the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. With fifty-two other Socialists, Laval opposed it, arguing that the terms were too severe and the means of enforcement too weak.

The euphoria of victory brought a demand for a middle-of-the-road Government – the middle-class *Bloc National* – and Laval had to defend himself at the hustings against accusations of socialist extremism and pacifism. He spoke of Chateldon, where every house had dead to mourn and wounded to be nursed back to manhood. He repeated that he was proud to have fought against the war. 'Vote for the Socialist list and you vote against the massacres of yesterday and the massacres of tomorrow, for the requital of our dead and the lives of our children!'

Not all the campaign was pitched on so highly emotional a note. He still had the opportunity, and delight, of tripping up his opponents. At one meeting, after the *Bloc National* candidate, a learned economist, had delivered an impressive speech on the national finances, Laval got to his feet and said: 'You have given us a remarkably fine lecture. Now, perhaps, you would say a few words about *la petite viande*?' Before the look of blank incomprehension had faded from his opponent's face, Laval turned to the audience and said: 'You see? He doesn't even know what *la petite viande* is! And he sets himself up as a man capable of representing you in the Chamber!'

But, as he stumped back to his local headquarters, with a thick scarf wrapped round his neck and his head bent forward, he grumbled that it was the same faces that he saw at every meeting. 'The others that we never see: what are they thinking? I very much fear that *ce vieux bougre de Clemenceau* has turned their heads.'

The returns on 11 November showed a sweeping victory for the *Bloc National* throughout the country. Laval, like most of his fellow Socialists, was defeated.

Party discipline irked him and had prevented him from putting his foot on the first rung of the ladder to Cabinet rank. Under the new electoral laws the whole of the *Bloc National* list had been elected in the constituency, though he had headed the Socialist list by several thousand votes. He was ready to leave but by nature was disinclined to arouse bitterness by a dramatic break.

His opportunity came with the Party congress at Tours in December 1920. There had long been friction between the supporters of the Second and Third Internationals: 'The Party's getting together for its annual split,' the wits used to say. The Communists staged a typically dramatic intervention. The conference hall suddenly went black and the doors were bolted and guarded. When the lights came on again, Clara Zetkin, who had been smuggled across the border from Germany, mounted the platform and demanded that the conference should declare for the Communist ticket: the establishment of international socialism by force.

This time the Party did split. The Communists rallied round Marcel Cachin, the moderates round Léon Blum. Laval disliked the policies of the first group and most of the members of the second. He left the Party and never joined another. Henceforward he stood as 'independent socialist'.

He continued to prosper as a lawyer. By the outbreak of the war he had been earning 50,000 francs a year. During the war he rented a house in the Villa Saïd, a private road near the Bois de Boulogne, where a near neighbour for the next ten years was Anatole France. Fear of bombing had brought down the value of houses in Paris and he picked up the twenty-five-year lease comparatively cheaply. Whether through bombing or neglect, the roof began to leak and Laval summoned the landlord to repair it. The landlord claimed that he could not afford the repairs and the house was put up for auction. Laval, having been at pains to explain the extent of the dilapidations to the other prospective buyers, managed to buy the house for 350,000 francs.

He had the peasant's lust for land and, after buying a plot at

Aubervilliers for 1,850 francs in 1922, he spent another 40,000 francs a year later on buying the *Domaine de la Corbière*, in Normandy. The farmhouse dated back to the fifteenth century and needed more money spent to modernise it. The farm, covering nearly three hundred acres, he stocked with cattle, buying and selling them himself.

His richer clients he received at the house in the *Villa Saïd*, and later in the office which he took in the *Avenue des Champs-Élysées*, but he still retained the office in the *Rue du Faubourg Saint-Martin* and kept up his connections with his poorer clients in the district. 'I am a friend among friends,' he used to say in Aubervilliers, 'a worker among workers. I am not like those lawyers with bourgeois backgrounds who are always conscious of their origins even when they are denying them. I am not like those lawyers who are witty and good at academic discussions and think themselves intellectuals. I am proud of what I am: a lawyer at the service of my labouring companions. Comrades, I am a manual lawyer!'

His appearance certainly bore it out: the straggled hair hanging over his forehead, his moustache singed by the cigarette that was constantly in his mouth, his well-cut but untidy clothes and the white tie that threw into relief the muddy colour of his complexion and the tobacco stains on his teeth. It had already become his badge, this white tie: probably the most unflattering style that he could have chosen for himself, giving him an odd, uncouth appearance at close quarters and, at a distance, making him look as if he wore no tie at all.

His friends deprecated it, his enemies made fun of it. There was a story that a malicious young woman had said to Josée: 'I do wish your father would reverse things: wear a black tie and white teeth.' But he was never seen without it and eventually nobody could think of Laval without thinking of his white tie – and the shrouded, saturnine face above it.

He numbered among his clients many of the scrap dealers who were now making fortunes from the trade in army surpluses and detritus from the battlefields. He drew up their contracts and not infrequently found himself called in to help them when they were charged with concealing their profits. It was a highly lucrative

practice and, since he handled all types of business, one in which he still found scope for his talent as a practical joker.

One morning, a client whom he had never met before appeared in his office and announced: 'I want a divorce. I have selected you as my lawyer. But there is one condition: I first want to hear your plea on my behalf. Straight away.'

Laval nodded. 'Naturally. That's always an excellent idea. I always work that way, anyhow. Would you care to step into my pleading-room, next door?'

He opened the door leading out of his chambers and, having got the man safely outside, said: 'On second thoughts, I'm not sure I'm capable of handling such an important case as yours. You ought to consult a specialist in this sort of work: Maître Uhry. Pop round and see him: here's his address. But on no account tell him I sent you - we're political enemies. And don't stand on ceremony if he refuses. Insist! Shout! He always agrees in the end.'

Laval met Uhry the following morning and politely asked if he were getting plenty of clients.

'Clients!' said Uhry, throwing his arms in the air. 'It's incredible! There was one yesterday who wanted me to plead his divorce in front of him. Have you ever come across one like that? He insisted. I got angry and tried to throw him out. Do you know, he threw himself at me as if he were going to strangle me. I had to call the police.'

'Ah,' said Laval with a straight face, 'one should never be sharp with a fool.'

His purchase of the plot of ground at Aubervilliers had qualified him to stand for the local council and he realised the advantage of having a local title when the national elections came round. In 1923 the council was split by a quarrel between the Communists and the Socialists and Laval led the Socialist group to triumph. On 9 March he was elected mayor and held the office continuously until 1944, when he was deprived of it by the Provisional Government. During that period he drifted more and more to the right, while most of the councils of the Red Belt swung towards Communism. His continuance of office as Mayor of Aubervilliers is a striking example of the confidence and devotion which he could arouse in limited areas, whereas those

with whom he could not make direct contact grew to distrust him increasingly.

He got a great deal of his own type of fun in fighting the local and national elections in Aubervilliers in 1923 and 1924. Much of the canvassing and speech-making was done in bistros, to noisy audiences and often in the presence of another candidate who had arrived and was awaiting his turn to speak. Laval was concluding his own address on one occasion when he noticed the arrival of his Communist opponent, a gas-worker named Dubois.

'Ah,' he said, 'I see my friend Dubois over there. I'll tell you what I will do for him. I am a lawyer: talking is my business. But he works hard every day in the gas-works. By the evening he is exhausted and lacks time to practise public speaking. Tonight I will deliver his speech for him.'

In a deep voice, with florid gestures and an accuracy perfected at many other meetings, he began to declaim: 'I greatly fear, Pierre Laval, that like Mussolini you will one day drench your hands in the blood of the working classes!' The bar rocked with laughter. He had no need to continue with the parody; and Dubois had to write himself a new speech.

Though he mocked his opponents unmercifully, he usually succeeded in retaining their friendship. On the last night of the campaign, he called on Dubois to help him. It was at a big public meeting which all three candidates were to address in turn.

The right-wing candidate had been an instructor at a depot during the war and had lost an eye when the grenade that he was demonstrating had exploded. He had been fitted with a glass eye, but Laval noted with great suspicion that whenever he appeared at a public meeting it was without the glass eye, so that his wound was more apparent.

Laval mentioned this to Dubois and added: 'You see what he's doing. He's getting at me and my war record. It's a dirty trick.' Dubois agreed that it was. Laval continued: 'I've done so much speaking, I've practically lost my voice.' (Which was quite true.) 'It's up to you to defend me.'

Dubois, a good-hearted man and perhaps a little flattered at being asked to defend a lawyer, mounted the platform full of indignation. Pointing to the right-wing candidate who had just

returned to his seat in the body of the hall, he shouted: 'What have you done with your eye?'

The ex-instructor, surprised and delighted with this turn of events, rose from his seat and said proudly: 'I lost it in the war.'

'Liar!' shouted Dubois. 'It's in your pocket.'

The small crinkles formed at the corners of Laval's mouth and then slowly mounted his cheeks to become wrinkles at the side of his dark twinkling eyes. He had a fascinating and most infectious grin. He won the election.

The following year, in April 1925, he was given his first ministerial post, as Minister of Public Works in Painlevé's Cabinet. The habits of long hours and sustained work which he had formed in his early days (he had sometimes crowded in as many as fifty consultations a day as well as court appearances) were continued in the Ministry in the Boulevard Saint-Germain. Neither he nor his wife had any interest in night-life. 'I go to bed at nine, as soon as I've read the newspapers, and I don't wake up until seven in the morning. That's what keeps me fit. Incidentally, there wouldn't be any divorce cases if everybody went to bed at nine like me.'

He arrived at the Ministry at 8 a.m. and spent the morning interviewing visitors, never taking notes but dictating summaries to his heads of department when he called them in at 12.30 to run through the paper-work of the day, for which he often showed a marked lack of respect. After lunch he would go to the Senate or the Chamber before returning to his office to see more visitors, and then he would pass on more work to his officials.

It was not a method of work that appealed to the ministerial staff, who disapproved not only of the long hours but also of Laval's habit of relying so much on informal conversations – in which they suspected he tended to surround himself with yes-men – and of his disregard for their own methods and opinions. The Civil Service grew to dislike Laval almost as much as the army did: not without reason, since he often failed to conceal his contempt for civil servants.

'That,' he would say in clinching an argument, 'is the opinion of the police sergeant of Puy-Guillaume; and the police sergeant of Puy-Guillaume is always right,' with the clear implication that

some might progress further in the hierarchy than a police sergeant, but only at the expense of leaving more and more of their common sense behind them.

It was not an easy term of office for him. Within three months there were a hundred railway accidents of varying degrees of severity and he brought his bustling energy to bear on the enquiries into each of them.

At Batignolles, just after two o'clock one morning, there was a train derailment. The doctors and police arrived and with them the engineers and officials of the railway company, intent on proving that it was the driver and not the system that was at fault. The driver claimed that the signals were always faulty and that the points did not work properly. The company representatives called him a liar and told the police to arrest him.

At this point, Laval arrived and walked over to the driver, who was suffering now from fear as well as shock. 'Haven't I seen you somewhere before?' asked Laval. 'Ever been to Aubervilliers? That's right - I knew your brother-in-law. Well, tell me what happened.'

The driver began to protest violently that it was none of his fault and Laval said quietly: 'No, no, don't shout like that: it's not right where people are suffering and dying. Talk quietly, and don't be scared. I'm here now, and all I want to know is the truth.'

For twenty minutes he listened to the man's story and put questions to him, speaking simply and unaffectedly. Finally he turned to the police inspector and said: 'What this fellow says seems to me to be genuine and to the point. I see no reason why he need be locked up.'

He stayed for another hour, urging on the rescue work, talking with the survivors, and when he left the crowd of onlookers raised a cheer - a not very common experience for a French Minister. In this sort of situation there were few other men with such strength of personality.

[3]

THE FRANCE THAT Laval was called to help to govern was not the land fit for heroes which each of the Allied countries thought

it had created for itself at the end of 'the war to end wars'. It was a land of anxiety and resentment: anxiety for its security in the future, resentment at its failure to get reparation for the blood it had so copiously spilt and the vast areas of its towns and countryside that had been so brutally destroyed.

The French found themselves confronted with German tactics which were then less familiar than they are now: refusal to meet the terms of the peace treaty (which, in any case, were imprecise on the question of reparations), the threat of a Communist take-over, the plea that Germany was not responsible for the war – or, at any rate, not the Germans who were doing the negotiating now – and an appeal for understanding and 'fair play'.

The British, sentimentally susceptible to this sort of argument and anxious to retain a balance of power in Europe, were soon giving three hearty cheers for the loser and deciding that the Germans were gallant, misunderstood and, finally, infamously treated by the French, who, in a despairing effort to collect reparations in 1923, had sent an army of occupation into the Ruhr where the Senegalese troops were alleged to be populating the countryside with black bastards.

The Americans, withdrawing into isolation from the bloody evils of corrupt Europe, turned a cold shoulder on the League of Nations that President Wilson had inspired. So, whimpering, bullying and blackmailing, Germany began its climb back to power.

France's despairing gesture of occupying the Ruhr brought her no nearer to forcing the Germans to hand over money that they claimed they had not got. But payment for the damage done was less important to France than the assurance of protection against another onslaught in the future. Russia had been torn by her great revolution and was no longer a force capable of casting a shadow on Germany from the east. Indeed, she no longer had any common frontier with Germany; at Germany's borders and beyond was a litter of vulnerable, newly-born states: Poland, reconstituted after a century of German and Russian rule; Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, which had not existed in that shape before; truncated Austria, all head and no body; and Hungary, Rumania, Bulgaria, Greece, each with conflicting

territorial claims upon another, with internal divisions, and with the envious eyes of their former masters upon them.

France made defensive pacts with Poland and Czechoslovakia, but even with their help forty million Frenchmen yearning for peace would be no match for sixty-five million Germans lusting for war. France needed the support of Britain and Britain, as always, had her eyes turned to the great oceans beyond which lay the Commonwealth.

The Dawes Plan of 1924 eased the quarrel about reparations and in 1925 Britain and Italy stood guarantors to a peace pact between France and Germany, promising to support either side against an aggressor. The French gained one concession: that action under the terms of their alliance with Poland and Czechoslovakia would not be deemed aggression. The Germans gained another: they had returned to the international conference table on terms of equality and henceforward could produce as many demands as they wished.

By the time that this Treaty of Locarno was signed, on 1 December 1925, Laval had moved from the Ministry of Public Works to become Under-Secretary of State to Aristide Briand, who held the posts of both President of the Council and Minister of Foreign Affairs. Briand's influence on Laval was considerable: he was a man of peace, an orator with a beautiful, persuasive voice, a negotiator whose quiet, persistent reasonableness did much to modify the British suspicion of French intransigence – though it was not always as highly appreciated by the long-suffering and impatient French.

Laval respected Briand's devotion to the cause of peace; Briand admired Laval's determination: 'Once he gets hold of something, the Auvergnat never lets go.' Both believed that Europe – including Germany – must forget its past quarrels and draw closer together. But Briand believed in mutual assurances under the League of Nations, while Laval by nature preferred a series of direct, businesslike pacts. Briand delighted in the title of 'poet of peace'; Laval claimed that he would be its engineer.

With the formation of a new Cabinet by Briand in March 1926 (his ninth, to be followed, in the instability of French politics, by his tenth three months later) Laval was promoted to the Ministry

of Justice, a man truly at the top of his profession at the age of forty-two. In July a monetary crisis drove Briand from power, and Laval with him. In January 1927 he left the Chamber and was elected as a Senator for the Department of the Seine.

While continuing to operate his law office, he began to develop his other interests. He was a very astute businessman and in the immediate post-war years had seriously considered giving up his legal practice altogether in order to concentrate on business. He had the ability to recognise a property which, though run down, was still capable of being built up again. He would buy it cheaply and, by careful stewardship and unremitting attention to detail, convert it into a paying proposition. He checked every book and counted every penny and paid the lowest prices for everything, including his employees' services. He was never too busy, or too proud, to haggle over a sou – another of the many lessons that he had learned at Chateldon.

In August 1927 he bought the *Moniteur du Puy-de-Dôme* and the Mont-Louis printing works at which it was produced in Clermont-Ferrand. Apart from being a property with a low yield but valuable equipment, it provided him with the protection of a local newspaper, without which every French politician feels naked. The price was nearly three million francs. His income from the law frequently rose above 100,000 francs a year, the farm at Corbières was run at a profit, his standard of living was always modest, but he was forced to borrow a considerable part of the money to acquire this new property.

His relations with the Press were good. The political parties were becoming more sharply divided and, as Laval moved towards the centre, the centre was splitting and moving out to the wings; but the right-wing Press was inclined to handle gently the politician who appeared to be moving in its own direction, and his departure from the Socialist Party had been sufficiently amicable for him to retain his friendship with many of the editors and writers on the left wing.

There remained, however, the wildly royalist *Action Française*, brilliantly and brutally written by Charles Maurras and Léon Daudet, viciously attacking almost every politician of the despised Republic and, on at least one occasion, driving a

Minister to suicide by the constant reiteration of charges that were libellous lies. By unexplained means, a compromising document came into the hands of the *Action Française*.

This document was no fake. It was a letter written by a journalist, Pierre Hamp, who had served as assistant head of Laval's secretariat at the Ministry of Public Works; it was addressed to Octave Homburg, a wealthy banker, financier and racehorse-owner, who had ambitions to enter Parliament; it purported to be a report of a conversation between Hamp and Laval, who was then taking the waters at Bagnoles de l'Orne.

Laval, said Hamp, was very happy to offer Homburg his advice on how to get himself elected as Deputy for the constituency of Le Raincy. 'M. Agard, the mayor, is sure to stand. This architect, whom M. Laval describes as a real gallows-bird, will probably be only too happy to cede his place, and even prepare it for you, particularly since your financial position will permit him to make demands on you, which is his main interest. It will be advisable to bargain with him, but there is no doubt that a bargain will be arrived at.'

Hamp then offered Laval's formula for winning an election: 'Come to terms with men rather than parties . . . Meet the leading personalities in small groups . . . It is a mistake to count on seducing the crowd. It must be broken up and propagandists introduced into it, whose work will do more than can be achieved at public meetings. M. Laval was successful in this way in his senatorial election by gradually disposing of all the parties and winning over a great number of individuals from among them.'

Finally: 'I have tried to discover in what way M. Pierre Laval may hope that his friendship towards you may be of use to him. This, of course, is nothing more than an assumption on my part, but I do not believe that any politician will render a service without hoping for support.

'M. Pierre Laval has for some months been at the head of a financial combination which has permitted him to acquire the *Moniteur du Puy-de-Dôme* . . .

'M. Laval's plan is to gain control of all the large provincial papers and use them as levers of public opinion, all aimed in the same direction.

'Finally, M. Pierre Laval, as a landowner in Normandy, breeds racehorses.

'These reflections, which I offer at random, are simply to give you something to think over before you meet M. Laval.'

It was only the letter of an underling, and indeed of a man who had been Laval's opponent in the senatorial elections, though, as usual, Laval had remained on friendly terms with him. It was not likely to cause any great commotion among the French, who were well aware that 'no politician will render a service without hoping for support'. It was more likely to rouse a snigger than to raise an eyebrow.

Nevertheless, Laval had been made to look a fool and there was a hint of corruption which he scarcely deserved. He was certainly not overburdened with scruples in his legal and business affairs but he decided early in his political career – on practical rather than moral grounds – that no man could last long as a leader of the French Government if he laid himself open to pressure and blackmail through corruption. And it was Laval's dearest ambition to become and remain a leader in French politics.

It was common knowledge that many French politicians were *affairistes*, using their influence and secret Cabinet information to make money. Laval never dabbled on the Stock Exchange; his only holding was a few shares in the Crédit Foncier d'Alger. From the moment that he became Minister of Justice he gave up pleading in the courts. Despite the determined efforts of his enemies, he was never directly implicated in the morass of corruption which many of his fellow-Ministers plunged into and swam out of during the inter-war years. Even in 1936, when the whole of the left-wing Press had turned against Laval, John Gunther reported that 'he is one of the few French politicians untouched by financial scandal'. From expediency, he kept his hands cleaner than most.

In March 1930, André Tardieu took him into his Cabinet as Minister of Labour. Serving for the first time under an avowedly right-wing Prime Minister, Laval showed considerable skill in handling the industrial disputes that were disturbing the country and was the first French Minister to adopt the now familiar technique of negotiating with each party isolated in a separate

room, himself trotting from one to the other until a sufficient measure of agreement had been reached to bring the two sides together and draw up a settlement. 'Arbitration: there's something in it for both sides,' he would repeat; and, when the workers looked doubtful, he would add: 'Never mind - it'll be your turn next time.'

The work on which he most prided himself was steering through both Houses of Parliament the social insurance services which had been hanging fire for ten years. It was a feeble enough measure by present-day standards, offering moderate protection against illness, accidents and old age to about eight million of the lowest-paid families. The right wing complained of State interference, additional burdens on the budget and interference with private enterprise; but Laval persuaded them that this was, after all, a not too socialist measure with which to outmanoeuvre the Socialists. To the Socialists he presented it as the first of many reforms.

He needed considerable skill and persuasion to get the same law past both Houses, since the Chamber was farther to the left than the Senate. Indeed, it was not quite the same law that the two Houses voted, and Laval made some rapid secret amendments to the text before it was published in the *Journal Officiel*. In answer to the complaints from both sides that the new provisions went too far or not far enough, Laval replied: 'Why scowl at a newborn child? Let's agree on its prime virtue: that it exists. Afterwards, in agreement, we can repent and make *amendements honorables*.'

[4]

TARDIEU'S CABINET FELL at the beginning of December 1930 and in January 1931 Laval successfully formed his first government. The Presidency of the Council made no difference to his habits either at home or in public. He was still available in his office to his rather odd collection of hangers-on. He still went straight home to his wife and Josée and then early to bed. For a time he did not have a private car and, rather than be bothered

with an official one, he used his secretary's. The same secretary, plagued by social climbers telephoning to ask which was Mme la Présidente's 'day', was further embarrassed when Mme Laval firmly replied: 'None.'

Laval combined the Ministry of the Interior with the Presidency of the Council. With his ambition to become the man who established the conditions for permanent peace, he would have preferred to take over the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but for the moment he left this to Briand, partly because of their long-standing friendship but also perhaps because he did not yet feel himself strong enough to dispense with Briand's prestige. In any case, he was not the man to allow his Ministers to take final decisions on important matters and Briand soon found that Laval was negotiating above his head.

International relations were still bedevilled by the problem of reparations and complicated by the debts which the Allies had contracted among themselves and the loans which some of them had made to Germany. The Young Plan of 1930 scaled down the amounts that Germany was to pay and spread them over a long period; the French accepted it in the belief that they would still receive enough not only to repair their war damage but also to pay off the debts that they had contracted, mainly in America.

They watched with misgiving the vast loans flowing to German industry from Britain and America. While the German Government apparently struggled with insoluble financial problems, German industry was equipping itself with new factories that presented a terrifying potential menace if war should come.

In the spring of 1931 the failure of an Austrian bank started a chain-reaction: the great depression began to sweep through Europe. On 20 June President Hoover proposed a moratorium: a one-year suspension of all debts between Governments. The French saw in this the thin edge of a cunning wedge to deprive them of reparations in order that British and American financial houses might continue to collect their private debts from Germany.

On 26 June Laval announced in Parliament that France would stand firm on the principle of reparations and would insist on a

guarantee that Germany should not be allowed to renounce any part of her repayment. France had not yet been affected by the depression and Laval was represented overseas as a typically greedy and unco-operative Frenchman, sitting on vaults full of gold in the Banque de France and flintily demanding more from those unable to pay. The American Secretary of State came to Paris to negotiate and Laval finally accepted the moratorium on condition that Germany's debts were guaranteed by the Reichsbank.

The moratorium, which should have come into operation a week before, was already too late, and foreign capital was fast flowing away from Germany. Ramsay MacDonald called a conference in London at which Germany could discuss her problems with her creditor countries: Britain, France, Italy, Belgium, Japan and the United States.

Laval, faithful to his preference for man-to-man negotiations rather than large conferences, asked Brüning, the German Chancellor, to talk with him in Paris on his way, and the two men met on 18 and 19 July. Brüning was accompanied by Dr Paul Schmidt, who was later to see a great deal more of Europe as Hitler's official interpreter.

'I cannot say,' recalled Schmidt, 'that M. Laval appeared very likeable, for I knew how short a time separated Germany from catastrophe and, consequently, my impression of the man who apparently paid no attention to this state of affairs was not very favourable. However, I was forced despite myself to admire one thing: this was the composure with which he accepted the reproaches addressed to him from the German side. It was simply impossible to shake him; he kept to his predetermined point of view and his unrealistic line of conduct.'

Laval's 'unrealistic line of conduct' was to offer the Germans a bargain: he would arrange a joint loan of a hundred million dollars by France, Britain and America; in return, Germany was to guarantee the resumption of reparation payments at the end of the moratorium, renounce the customs union with Austria which she had proposed earlier in the year, and agree to a ten-year 'political moratorium' during which she would abstain from any demand for the revision of treaties or of her eastern frontiers.

Brüning replied that all the clauses were too harsh and that the last one was impossible: the German people would overthrow any Government which agreed to renounce their claims to expansion in the east.

Laval argued with all his skill but could achieve nothing. He was unaware that the American Government had already informed Brüning that they knew of Laval's plan and did not support it. He accompanied Brüning to London, where he got a mixed reception from the Press and attended the conference at which Germany was granted the hundred-million-dollar credit without any of the safeguards that he had demanded. Britain and America were agreed that Laval was being much too beastly to the Germans.

Even though he had failed to tie them down, he realised that some sort of agreement with them was essential if France was to live in peace: 'We shall always be thirty-eight or forty millions compared with their sixty to seventy millions, and we have a common frontier. Do you know the Arab proverb: 'If you cannot kill your enemy, give him your daughter in marriage'? It's even more true when your enemy is your neighbour. Geography compels it, and geography does not change.'

In September he sent André François-Poncet to Berlin as Ambassador with instructions to push on with arrangements for a new meeting between Laval, Briand and Brüning. A meeting had been agreed during their journey back from London and the invitation had been renewed in August but had had to be postponed because of Briand's poor health. On that occasion, Laval simply picked up the telephone in Paris and asked for Brüning in Berlin; he apologised for the postponement and took the opportunity at the same time to read to Brüning a few phrases referring to Germany in a speech which he was about to deliver to the French Parliament.

He was delighted by the uproar that followed among his civil servants. 'What a revolution that was in the Quai d'Orsay and the Wilhelmstrasse! What formalists these diplomats are! Why can't one act simply? The telephone is direct; it allows you to show more politeness and to hear the voice of the man you're dealing with. I like reading voices.'

On 19 September, at one o'clock in the morning, he himself received an unexpected telephone call. The anxious voice at the other end was that of the British Chargé d'Affaires, Sir Ronald Campbell, announcing that, in the absence of the Ambassador, who had been called to London, he had a most urgent message to deliver. Laval, who was living in the private rooms of the Ministry of the Interior, got dressed and went down to meet him. Campbell told him that the Bank of England had been faced with such an unprecedented run on its gold reserves that it was on the point of failing to meet its obligations. Would France come to her aid?

'I will call a Cabinet meeting tomorrow morning and put the proposal to them,' Laval said.

Tight-lipped and white-faced, Campbell answered: 'The matter is much too serious and secret for a dozen Ministers to have knowledge of it; the slightest indiscretion on the part of any one of them would do irreparable damage to British credit. And the matter is of the most extreme urgency.' He handed Laval a note which he had written for the Minister of Finance (and had translated in his own hand into French in order to preserve secrecy) but which he had since been ordered from London to deliver only to Laval personally.

Laval was already President of the Council, Minister of the Interior and virtually Minister of Foreign Affairs. With typical self-confidence he now stepped into the shoes of the Minister of Finance. 'Have your Government assess the exact amount of the loan she requires,' he told Campbell, 'and then get in touch with Washington. Propose that America take a half share in the loan and make it clear that France has already agreed to putting up the other half. Come and see me again tomorrow and, if America has not agreed to put up her half, I will let my offer stand for the whole amount. I will throw my country's vaults wide open to you.'

The unemotional Campbell took both of Laval's hands in his own. 'My country will never forget you,' he said. He returned in the morning to tell Laval that America was unable to help Britain. Laval put through the full loan: three thousand million gold francs.

On 27 September he left with Briand for the deferred trip to Berlin, the first official visit by a French President of the Council since 1878. The mission was largely exploratory, though an economic committee was set up to discover means of closer co-operation between the two countries, and Laval himself had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of the German President and the best-known German dish.

The President, Hindenburg, had reached the age where he was incapable of recalling the recent past and lived more and more in the sabre-rattling days of his youth and the Franco-Prussian War. His staff, providing him with background information in readiness for Laval's visit, mentioned that the French Prime Minister was also Mayor of Aubervilliers. 'Aubervilliers?' repeated the Field-Marshal. 'I was stationed there in 1871. Excellent billets!'

Laval was informed of this but assured that Hindenburg's staff had made it clear to the old man that it would not be tactful to mention this souvenir to a Frenchman. On Laval's arrival, however, Hindenburg's first words were: 'So you're the Mayor of Aubervilliers? My congratulations. Excellent billets!'

Laval, with a twinkle and a side-glance at a more recent war, replied: 'Thank you for that tribute, Marshal. Aubervilliers has always known how to receive its guests in proper fashion.'

'I got a very hard look from the French diplomatic representative,' said Laval, telling the story afterwards, 'but I just couldn't help it. And I think my answer pleased the old man. I'm sure he'd still like to come back to Aubervilliers.'

His introduction to *sauerkraut* was less happy. He had eagerly looked forward to being offered it at the lunch and dinner that he was given by the German Foreign Minister and the Chancellor, but had been disappointed. François-Poncet explained that it was a regional dish of the west and south but not often found in the north or east of Germany. Laval grumbled that he didn't see why he should have to go home without having eaten *sauerkraut* in its native surroundings.

On the final night of his visit there was a dinner for seventy at the French Embassy in the Pariser Platz, with magnificent food, no speeches – and no *sauerkraut*. Laval returned to his hotel in a

determined mood and ordered the kitchen staff to send him some up. His staff joined him, not too happily, in this midnight feast. In the early hours of the morning, the policemen outside were astonished to see the French *Président du Conseil* emerge from his hotel and trundle despondently up and down Unter den Linden, trying to walk off a violent bout of indigestion. When François-Poncet called at the Adlon at 7.30 a.m. he found that Laval had gone. He was already at the station, yellow-faced and disconsolate, waiting for the train to take him home.

In October he left for America, to talk with President Hoover. Josée, now twenty, went with him, but his wife, as always, preferred to stay at home. She disliked social occasions and was popularly supposed to have only one dress, one coat and one hat, which she replaced only when Josée firmly protested that they were really too shabby. She remained in the background, fussing over her husband and giving him shrewd advice – which he often disregarded, to his own cost – but seldom appearing at his side in public. She liked preparing his meals and, when his fondness for rich dishes played havoc with his ulcer, supervising his diet and sternly refusing to let him drink spirits. It was her delight – and his – to see their brilliant daughter accompany him on the journeys abroad that he made during the next four or five years.

Laval got on well with Hoover, two businessmen talking the same language, and even cast a mild spell over America's most virulent isolationist, Senator Borah; but he failed to get anything concrete from the American Government on the continuing problem of reparations and security. Both America and Britain were refusing to support France's claims for the resumption of reparations after the moratorium unless she agreed to join in a general plan for disarmament. France, nervous of Germany's superiority in industrial and man-power, refused to disarm until she had been given adequate guarantees for her security. Germany was by now clamouring that if the others did not disarm, she had a right to rearm.

At the disarmament conference at Geneva in February 1932, Tardieu, whom Laval had placed at the Ministry of War after Maginot's death in January, put forward a French Government proposal that disarmament should be dependent on the creation of

a strong international force which could deal with aggression. This was opposed by the British, and Laval grew more annoyed with the nation that pressed him to throw away his weapons yet refused to support a police force to protect him, an attitude which he attributed to Britain's selfish preoccupation with its business interests outside Europe and its refusal to contribute anything to the stability of the continent. 'Stick a pound note in front of an Englishman's eyes and it blots out the whole horizon,' he said.

His Government was defeated by one vote on 17 February and he resigned. The Tardieu Government which followed, and in which he served as Minister of Labour, lasted for only four months. He was out of office for nearly two years and able to devote more time to his business interests, which had continued to grow.

In 1928 he had raised the money to buy the Radio-Lyon broadcasting station and another newspaper, *Lyon Républicain*. Much of the broadcasting station's revenue came from advertising programmes directed to British listeners. He set about building up the connection and opened an office at 120 Avenue des Champs-Élysées. But he spent as little time as possible in Paris, for the innkeeper's son from Chateldon who had married the mayor's daughter and risen in the world had now become the local squire: he had bought the château of Chateldon for 150,000 francs towards the end of 1931. On the chimney-piece in the dining-room was an inscription that dated from the Middle Ages, an echo of his conversation with Hindenburg and perhaps an ominous warning of the future: 'Here the English got such a warm reception that they never came back again.'

The château was badly in need of repair and did not carry much land with it: about three acres, a few mineral springs and a derelict saw-mill. Laval later added an old paper-mill, but he first concentrated on the mineral springs, making great plans for bottling and distributing the water and finally getting it accepted for use on all railway dining-cars.

'The mineral water is marvellous,' he claimed. 'I draw it from two springs. The first gives vigour to men. The second gives fecundity to women. The trick is not to confuse the two.'

MAY 1932 WAS an eventful month. The elections brought the *Cartel des Gauches* – an alliance of Socialists and Radical-Socialists – into power. In the first week, the President of the Republic, Doumer, was assassinated and succeeded by the President of the Senate, Albert Lebrun. In the last week, Brüning resigned in Germany and was replaced by von Papen, figurehead of the junkers and industrialists.

In June and July the Allied Governments reviewed Germany's reparation payments and agreed to a token payment and the cancellation of the remainder. The Germans switched their attack to the disarmament problem and in December the French Prime Minister, Herriot, agreed to the Disarmament Conference formula of 'equality of status between France and Germany within a system of security' – without getting any agreement on what was, for France, an acceptable system of security.

In December Herriot was defeated after having failed to get agreement on the relationship between France's debts to her former allies and the reparations which Germany owed her and which the Allies had cancelled. He was succeeded by his former pupil and protégé, Edouard Daladier. Daladier, heavy-faced, ruddy-cheeked, thick-set like a wrestler, was reputed to be a strong man in politics. 'The bull of the Vaucluse,' his supporters called him. 'A bull with the horns of a snail,' his opponents commented.

Daladier took office on 31 January 1933. The preceding day Hitler had accepted the chancellorship in Germany. Daladier sent Fernand de Brinon, a shady journalist, to make approaches to Hitler and later in the year, at Ramsay MacDonald's instigation, accepted Mussolini's proposal to form a four-nation directory – France, Britain, Italy and Germany – to preserve the peace by agreeing among themselves the questions of disarmament and 'peaceful revision' of frontiers.

This Four-Power Pact, signed in June but never ratified, had

nothing but ill effects. In its first draft it did not even mention the League of Nations, and the smaller countries on German's eastern frontier shivered with apprehension at what the 'peaceful revision' was going to mean to them. Marshal Pilsudski, who had proposed to Daladier in March that Poland and France should join in a preventive war against Germany to get rid of Hitler, now began to negotiate for a German-Polish pact. In October Hitler ordered his representatives to withdraw from both the Disarmament Conference and the League of Nations, and Germany, stimulated by the sound of marching Nazi boots and the sight of 250 Jews forced to crop grass in a field with their teeth, gave him more than ninety per cent support in a national referendum.

At home Daladier was faced with a grave economic situation, now that the depression was belatedly catching up with France. The general dissatisfaction with the Government was fanned into flame by the revelation of a scandal that was startling even by French political standards: the Stavisky affair.

Alexandre Stavisky had risen from dope-peddling, through organised gambling, to straightforward financial swindling, following the simple system of covering his defalcations in one company by floating another that was bigger. He had been arrested in 1926 on a charge of fraud but had been provisionally released and never brought to court.

Despite the geometrical progression of his frauds, he could have counted on several more years of affluence had not overconfidence or shortage of cash (he was a free spender with a large entourage, including a personal bodyguard named Jojo-la-Terreur) prompted him to issue so many shares in his latest venture – the Bayonne municipal pawnshop – that people began to ask questions. He was not sufficiently advanced with his next scheme – the sale of worthless Hungarian war-bonds – to be able to cover up the deficiencies in the Bayonne one. He took to his heels and was for some weeks lost sight of. On 8 January 1934 he was found dead in a chalet at Chamonix.

Now the background details began to come out: his release from custody in 1926; recommendations of his shares signed by one Minister; nineteen postponements of his trial by the

Parquet, whose president was the brother-in-law of another Minister; the issue by some unidentified Government official of the passport on which he escaped to Switzerland; finally the suggestion that he had not committed suicide but had been shot by the French police to keep his mouth shut.

The right-wing Press leaped at the opportunity to discredit the Socialists and Radical-Socialists. The *Camelots du Roi*, the royalist group supported by the *Action Française*, demonstrated in the streets. Three Governments came and went in three months. Daladier, the strong man, returned at the end of January, promising to restore order. By this time the *Camelots du Roi* had been joined by the *Jeunesses Patriotes*, who received their funds from heavy industry; by *Solidarité Française*, rather unexpectedly founded by the scent manufacturer, Coty; by the *Union National des Combattants*, a right-wing offshoot of France's principal ex-servicemen's organisation; and, most important of all, by the half-million followers of Colonel de la Rocque's *Croix de Feu*, which was originally restricted to ex-soldiers who had won decorations under fire but was later extended to include their sons, nephews, friends and casual acquaintances.

Whether any or all of these really believed that they could turn out the deputies and bring about a Fascist revolution is doubtful. La Rocque, a lean, good-looking man with a distinguished military record but a strange hesitation in moments of decision, certainly did not press home his advantages with much determination. Laval, who despised even semi-military organisations, said of him: 'That idiot knows nothing about politics. You watch – he'll precipitate a Popular Front victory'; which, after some delay, he did.

Daladier was due to present his new Government to the Chamber on 6 February 1934. By seven o'clock that evening, the Place de la Concorde, just across the bridge from the Chamber of Deputies, was filled with thirty thousand demonstrators. As the contingents continued to march in, the hysteria mounted. Scuffles with the police were followed by sporadic shooting. Barricades were erected and buses overturned and burnt. Razors tied to the end of sticks were used to slash the tendons of the

police horses. Pieces of coping stone and iron rails from the Tuileries Gardens were hurled at the police, who retired behind their own barricade at the entrance to the Pont de la Concorde.

While the mob on the right bank set fire to the Ministry of Marine and attempted to raid the Elysée Palace, the Chamber gave Daladier a vote of confidence by 343 to 237. The mob gathered again the following day and Daladier, who already had troops standing by, announced that he would use the army to disperse the rioters. President Lebrun, protesting that this was the last step towards civil war, threatened to resign if he did so. Instead, it was Daladier who resigned, having held power for four days.

It was a time of crisis, and the time for a 'national' Government. Laval, eagerly bustling into the negotiations, personally telephoned the former President of the Republic, Gaston 'Papa' Doumergue, and persuaded him to accept the Presidency of the Council. He was rewarded with the Ministry of the Colonies in the new Government, in which both Tardieu from the right wing and Herriot from the left centre were appointed Ministers of State. The aged Marshal Pétain, already far into his seventies, was appointed Minister of War.

The Fascist riots in the Place de la Concorde were followed by Communist riots in the Place de la République, and to these was added a wave of strikes. The new Government walked warily, one eye on its troubles at home and the other on Hitler's manoeuvres abroad.

In January Anthony Eden and Sir John Simon had gone to Berlin to consult Hitler on a new British-Italian disarmament proposal. Hitler replied that Germany would agree to an army of 300,000 men, against 500,000 for France, and an air force only half the size of the French, with international control of war materials. Barthou, the French Foreign Minister, was at first inclined to accept the proposal, but it was opposed by Doumergue, Herriot, Tardieu and Pétain. Laval attacked Pétain, saying: 'If Hitler's proposal is rejected, it means war sooner or later. So you'd better put a draft bill before the Cabinet, asking for a considerable increase in military credits to prepare for it.' He was overruled and the proposal was rejected.

Barthou now set about trying to mend the gaps in France's defensive system caused by the Four-Power pact. In May he consulted with Litvinov to prepare the way for Russia's admission to the League of Nations and then visited Poland, Rumania, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia in the hope of arranging an Eastern Locarno. In October he was assassinated at Marseilles while receiving King Alexander of Yugoslavia. Laval took over the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where he was to remain for a year and a quarter.

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'THERE ARE FIVE or six men in the world upon whom peace depends,' Laval said. 'I am one of them.' In his quest for peace – at least, peace for France – he was to earn the dislike or distrust of almost every other country. In his handling of home affairs he was to earn something close to hatred from many of his own countrymen.

He had been in accord with Barthou's policy in general, but against it in detail. He agreed on the necessity of alliances with the small states on the far side of Germany, but distrusted multilateral pacts. He wanted a series of straight bargains between one nation and another for mutual assistance, so that one defection would not cause the whole lot to collapse.

The country with which he most urgently wanted to make such an arrangement was Italy, for with Italy on France's side French divisions were free to move from the Italian frontier to the Rhine and all the other countries from the Balkans up through the Little Entente to Russia could be supplied with arms and men from France. Germany, instead of being sandwiched, would be almost encircled.

His chances of reaching an agreement with Mussolini were good. The German and Italian dictators had had their first meeting at Venice in June and it had been far from cordial. Mussolini, expecting to impress his junior and imitator, found Hitler much too arrogant. Hitler, who had bought a new raincoat

for the occasion, was mortified at being out-uniformed and out-medalled by Mussolini and his staff. They were a sinister, if slightly comical, pair: Mussolini, in a tasselled cap and baggy breeches, looking like a mutinous fat boy with vaguely dirty habits; Hitler concealing incalculable perversions behind his cow-lick quiff and improbable moustache. They agreed to dislike Russia on ideological grounds and France on practical ones, but did not settle the real bone of contention between them, Austria, which Hitler was committed to bring into the German Reich and which Mussolini needed to keep independent in order to protect his northern frontier.

In July the Austrian Nazis murdered Mussolini's protégé, Dollfuss, while members of Dollfuss's family were actually Mussolini's guests in Italy. Mussolini moved his troops up to the Brenner Pass and Hitler was forced to allow Schuschnigg, another of Mussolini's nominees, to put down the Nazi *coup*. Hitler lost face and Mussolini lost his temper, referring to Hitler as 'a horrible sexual degenerate and a dangerous fool'.

At Bari in September he said: 'Thirty centuries of history allow the Italians to regard with supreme indifference certain doctrines taught beyond the Alps by the descendants of people who were wholly illiterate in the days when Cæsar, Virgil and Augustus flourished in Rome'. Later that month he invited France and Britain to join him in a declaration in favour of Austria's independence. In a speech in October he said: 'An understanding between Italy and France would be useful and fruitful.'

Laval was delighted. He put out feelers for a meeting and ordered plans to be drawn up for offering some sort of sop overseas to Italy, who was for ever clamouring that she had never been rewarded for her desertion of Germany in the 1914-18 war, claiming compensation in north and north-east Africa, and now and then belligerently shouting for Nice and Corsica in addition to Tunis.

In December Laval went to Geneva and deftly smoothed over the disturbed relations between Yugoslavia and Hungary, where King Alexander's assassins had been trained; and between Yugoslavia and Italy, by whom they had probably been paid.

He left Paris to visit Mussolini on 3 January 1935, taking Josée with him. It was his first visit to Italy, his first meeting with Mussolini, and his first meeting with the Pope. The occasion gave the left-wing reporters scope for a flood of amusing anecdotes: Laval's indignant protest, 'They're saying I addressed the Pope as Your Reverence – everybody knows he's called the Holy See'; or his remark, when being rehearsed for the audience and told that he must make three genuflections: 'Three what?' They were representative of the popular image of Laval as an uncouth tough, but did not, of course, allow for the fact that he had been reared in a Catholic family and had himself been a choirboy.

The meeting with the Pope, and the presentation of Josée afterwards, seemed to make a considerable impression on him and awakened boyhood memories, particularly of his quiet, devout mother, who had died in 1922. 'If only my poor mother could have seen her Pierrot received by His Holiness,' he said, as he emerged wearing his newly conferred papal order. He was the first French Minister to visit the Pope since the Third Republic was founded and did not, after all, have to make his three genuflections: the Pope came to meet him and offered him a chair, where he remained talking for more than twice the twenty minutes prescribed by protocol.

To the Pope he presented three rare and exquisitely bound books. To Mussolini he brought different presents, though not of much greater value. During discussions at the Quai d'Orsay before his visit, his staff had tried to get him to consult maps of the territory that he was going to offer to Italy and he had, as was his custom with documents, flung them aside, saying: 'I know what it is – a lot of sand and rocks.' It was, in fact, not much more: some desert on the southern border of Libya, eight hundred square kilometres of French Somaliland, the right to buy a twenty per cent share in the railway from Djibouti to Addis Ababa. When Mussolini complained that he was being given nothing but desert, Laval grinned and answered: 'Oh, there's bound to be a few villages; though, of course, they won't be Rome – or Aubervilliers.'

In return for the French concessions Mussolini recognised France's rights in Tunisia and renounced special treatment for

Italian nationals there. It was the settlement of a thorny problem but would not in itself have justified Laval's visit. What was not revealed until ten years later was that Laval and Mussolini had signed a secret treaty under which France would send troops to support Italy if Hitler moved into Austria and Mussolini would give air support to France if Hitler tried to reoccupy the Rhineland.

At the end of February Laval invited Schuschnigg to Paris to discuss the defence of Austria and had his first serious brush with the Popular Front. Moves for an alliance between the French Socialist and Communist Parties had taken place in February 1934, almost simultaneously with Dollfuss's brutal crushing of the workers' revolt in Vienna, and in July of that year an official agreement was signed between the two parties, welding the extreme left into a solid and very powerful bloc which soon began to attract some Radical-Socialists.

The visit of Schuschnigg, who had been Dollfuss's Minister of Justice, gave the Popular Front the opportunity for a hostile demonstration. Léon Blum urged the people of Paris to 'take reprisals by hooting and booing the new Chancellor at the station'. The Minister of the Interior was so scared of what might happen that he had Schuschnigg smuggled off the train at a wayside station and virtually held prisoner during his stay.

'How are we going to prevent the annexation of Austria,' Laval asked bitterly, 'if we can't guard two station platforms?' It was the beginning of his long and acrimonious quarrel with the left wing. Completely materialist and realist in his love for France, he could not understand how fellow-Frenchmen could prejudice French interests by their allegiance to abstract international political theories, their devotion to Marxism and their hatred of Fascism. 'Those damned *idéologues*!' he would growl. 'The Rights of Man? Certainly. But the rights of Frenchmen first.' Blum was on the one hand clamouring for disarmament and on the other trying to cut France off from support from every Government whose political colour he didn't like. To ensure the security of France, he, Laval, would make a bargain with any Government that could help, and to hell with their political theories.

It was evident that France was going to need help, for on 9 March Hitler announced that he was going ahead with the formation of a German air force. Flandin replied, despite uproar in Parliament from the Popular Front, that France would extend its period of military service by six months to compensate for the small classes now due to be called up – the too few children of 1914–18. The following day Hitler announced conscription in Germany and his intention to form twelve army corps. In Berlin the Ambassadors of France, Britain and Italy handed in notes of protest. In Italy Mussolini recalled the class of 1911 to the colours.

In April Flandin and Laval, MacDonald and Simon met Mussolini at Stresa to condemn the unilateral action of Germany and to confirm their collaboration under the Treaty of Locarno and their determination to preserve peace in Europe. Laval went on to Geneva and, in the name of the three countries, proposed the solemn condemnation of Germany for violation of Article 5 of the Treaty of Versailles. Germany was solemnly condemned.

There was one very delicate subject which all three countries had carefully avoided at Stresa: the growing tension over Abyssinia. Forty years before, an Italian army had suffered a humiliating defeat, and its captured soldiers the most atrocious mutilations, at the hands of the Abyssinians at Adowa. With Italians, French and British occupying contiguous strips of coastland in Eritrea and Somaliland, it had served Britain's purpose at the time of the Fashoda incident to encourage Italy's claims in Abyssinia at the expense of the French. Eight years later the pact of 1906 among the three countries limited France's interests to the Djibouti-Addis Ababa railway, Britain's to Lake Tsana and the headwaters of the Blue Nile, and left much of the rest of Abyssinia as Italy's 'zone of influence'.

The Emperors of Abyssinia had only the vestiges of control over the tribes outside the central Amharic portion of the country and the European Powers were constantly troubled by frontier incidents. This did not prevent the French and Italians in 1923 from proposing Abyssinia for membership of the League of Nations in a move to dish the British, who unsuccessfully argued that the Abyssinian Government was not in control of the country

and was also actively encouraging slavery and the slave trade.

Towards the end of 1934 an incident at Walwal, quite indistinguishable in violence from many others, and well inside Abyssinian territory, gave Mussolini the pretext for demanding an unconditional apology, a large indemnity, and a final definition of the frontier. The Emperor claimed that the dispute should go to arbitration, but Mussolini, determined on a war that would season his troops and bring him fame as the Avenger of Adowa, refused to negotiate. He began to build up his garrison in Eritrea and made it clear that he was going to bring the Abyssinians to heel.

During the Rome discussions he had received Laval's assurance that France would not raise objections to Italian expansion in Abyssinia provided that it was achieved by peaceful means. He had asked Britain to state her position and the British had kept him waiting while, they told him, their experts studied the question. Meanwhile, his intelligence service had photographed secret documents in the British Embassy which revealed that the British were not worried about Italian encroachments provided they did not threaten Lake Tsana.

At Stresa, where both British and Italian experts on Abyssinia were present, Mussolini is said to have asked MacDonald and Simon whether they had anything to add to the agenda and they replied that they had not. Another story alleges that, when the wording of the resolution was being agreed, Mussolini asked that the reference to the preservation of the peace should be amended to 'peace in Europe': an alteration whose significance could not have been lost upon anybody present.

Certainly it appears that Mussolini assumed that the French were largely in sympathy with his plans and that the British, though possibly contemplating some double-dealing and hard bargaining, were not essentially opposed to them. This false assumption was shortly to bring about the collapse of the League of Nations – already toppling after the withdrawal of Japan and Germany and lacking the support of America – the disgrace and fall from power of Laval, and ultimately the Second World War.

THREE WEEKS AFTER his denunciation of Germany at Geneva, Laval was in Moscow to arrange an alliance with the Russians. It was not an easy task. He did not trust the Russians and, more importantly, neither did their neighbours. Czechoslovakia was in favour of a Franco-Russian alliance, but had no common frontier with Russia; Rumania was wary of entanglements because Russia refused to recognise Rumania's annexation of Bessarabia; Poland was so anti-Russian that she had signed a ten-year non-aggression pact with Germany.

Laval arrived in Moscow just before noon on 13 May and went straight into talks with Litvinov, the Russian Foreign Minister. The following day he spent six hours in the Kremlin with Litvinov, Molotov and Stalin, whom he always regarded as the most impressive and intelligent of the dictators: 'He's got peasant ways. He listens to you. He watches you. Sometimes he jokes and has an enchanting laugh. But, believe me, he knows what he's about. He's an Asiatic.' (Some observers said that he and Laval at times looked like brothers.) 'He's pitilessly realistic. He'll show no mercy in applying Marxian tactics; and the Marxian principle is to utilise all means, even the most cynical, to attain its ends. A peculiar sort of idealism. But what a weapon!'

It was on this occasion that Stalin cracked a joke that he was to repeat at least once later. Laval was still under the spell of his reception at the Vatican. He told Stalin that the Pope was a great man and had great influence.

Stalin grinned: 'And how many divisions has he got?'

Laval was seldom lost for a reply. 'I'm not asking you to make a treaty of mutual assistance with him,' he said. 'Just a non-aggression pact.'

The Russians went to considerable lengths to impress Laval with their military and industrial development. There was an imposing parade of troops to greet him. During a fly-past at an airfield, women parachutists dropped from the planes. Each

carried a bunch of flowers to be collected and made into a vast tricolour bouquet, which was presented to Josée, who, as usual, had accompanied him.

Josée had further proof of Russian attention and efficiency. She had been given the services of an extremely pretty French-speaking maid, who had also caught the eye of the French detectives travelling with Laval's party. Entering her room unexpectedly, Josée found the pretty young Russian, enthusiastically aided by one of the detectives, making a rapid search of her baggage.

Laval's favourite example of Russian administrative efficiency, which he used to tell with a touch of sympathy, a glint of malice and not a little pride, occurred at the dinner that Molotov gave for him: a grandiose, glittering, belly-stuffing, head-muzzying, interminable Russian banquet. 'Ten sorts of fish, stacks of caviare, that damned Baltic herring that I got so greedy for, wines from the Crimea and even champagne that came from the Tsarist cellars, they told me.

'When the dessert arrived, Marshal Budenny did a peasant dance – the sort of thing where you seem to sit on your feet and throw your legs out left and right. I wondered what French general could pass that test. It was gay. Everybody was joking. I watched Stalin. He said nothing, smiled weirdly out of the corners of his eyes and took his drinks neat.

'The conversation turned to agriculture. One of the Soviet Ministers said to me patronisingly: "With you, in France, it's usually a politician who is put in charge of the Ministry of Agriculture. With us, it's a technician."

;' "That's true," I replied. "Look at me – I'm an agricultural specialist. Well! They've given me Public Works, Justice, Interior, Labour, Foreign Affairs, but never Agriculture. I'm a graduate in natural history and I raise horses, cows and pigs. I can prune fruit-trees and vines, raise cereals. Would you have any hesitation in putting me in charge of a kolkhos?"

' "It's a very technical thing," they told me.

' "All right then," I said. "Show me your technician." They pointed out the People's Commissar for Agriculture – I've forgotten his name.

“Can I put a question to you?” I asked. The interpreter translated his reply at once: “All the questions that you like.”

“Right then. How can you tell if a cow will give a good yield of butter?”

“That’s simple,” answered the People’s Commissar. “You feel the pelt, the back, the udder. . . .”

“Excuse me,” I said, “but those are the methods for recognising a good milch cow. I didn’t say milk yield, I said butter yield.” The interpreter translated my remarks. The People’s Commissar remained silent. I noticed that Stalin had riveted his gleaming eyes on him, and the eyes were not smiling any more.

“Well,” I said triumphantly, “this is what we do in the Auvergne: we put a forefinger deep into the cow’s ear and if it brings out a lot of fat matter – earwax, that is – then the cow will give a good yield of butter.”

‘Everybody laughed at the Soviet Minister’s discomfiture – except Stalin. When I got back to France, I learned that the People’s Commissar had been dismissed.’

The treaty with Russia had little military value until Laval could persuade Poland to change her attitude, but there was one immediate benefit he could draw from it. On the night before he left, there was a gala performance of *Lac des Cygnes* at the Opera House. In the interval Laval went on to the stage and read a communiqué which he had persuaded Stalin to sign: ‘M. Stalin understands and fully approves the policy of national defence undertaken by France to maintain her strength at security level.’ Laval had spiked the guns of the French Communists, who had opposed the extension of military service, and perhaps driven a small wedge between them and the Socialists, who still stood for disarmament.

He left Moscow in good humour. In his baggage were two Russian outfits that Stalin had presented to him, and at Minsk he amused himself by dressing up in one of them to inspect the guard of honour lined up on the station platform. With his Asiatic features and an almost Stalin-like glint in his eyes, he was not an altogether incongruous figure in the bright silk blouse with gilt facings, the baggy breeches and tall soft leather boots.

He broke his journey at Warsaw to attend the funeral service

for Marshal Pilsudski in the cathedral and the burial the following day at Cracow. Marshal Pétain attended as the official representative of France, and Göring for Germany. When they had recovered from the exhausting four-hour walk behind the gun-carriage under the broiling sun, Göring invited Laval to a private talk at the Hôtel de France. He opened it in the deceptively frank, bull-at-a-gate manner that concealed a great deal more cunning and adroitness than he was usually given credit for.

'You seem to have got on very well with the Bolsheviks in Moscow,' he began. 'We know them better in Germany than you do in France. We know it's a mistake to get mixed up with them at any price: you always suffer for it. You'll find that out for yourself. Just wait and see the difficulties your Communists will make for you in Paris. And the Russians don't intend to go to war: they just want others to make war on their behalf – preferably war between France and Germany. Then they'll walk in and pick up the loot . . .'

Laval interrupted to point out that France was under no obligation to support Russia unless she were attacked. 'I've seen nothing in Moscow to suggest that Russia has aggressive intentions towards Germany.' He recommended that the Germans themselves should try negotiating with Stalin: 'he's a man you can talk to'. He asked what steps Germany was prepared to take to guarantee peace on her eastern frontiers.

Göring sidestepped the question and talked about Germany's good faith and good intentions. She had left the League of Nations because she had lost confidence in it, but she might always return, and in any case the real crux of the matter was to reach an understanding with France. 'The German people has no more fervent wish than to see its quarrels with its French neighbours permanently buried. We honour your fellow-countrymen as brave soldiers; we are full of admiration for the achievements of French culture; the old bone of contention of Alsace-Lorraine no longer exists. What is there to prevent our becoming really good neighbours?'

Laval assured him that this was his dearest wish too. 'But certain events that have occurred in Germany, things that have been said and written, your rearmament – all this has aroused

considerable uneasiness in France, and anything that will dissipate that feeling will contribute indirectly to a Franco-German understanding.' Therefore, the Franco-Russian pact was a good thing, even from the German point of view.

It was a typical Laval argument, and one of his favourite approaches to the dictators. The all-powerful dictator had no need to bother with unfavourable reactions at home, but Laval, as a democratic statesman, had to carry public opinion with him. It was a difficult argument for a dictator to deny without damage to his self-conceit.

Laval had already used it in Rome when Mussolini was baulking at the settlement that gave him much less than he had expected. 'You, Duce, are the unfettered ruler of Italy,' Laval had said. 'I am simply a Minister of the French Government. I have to render an account of the results of my mission to the Cabinet, to Parliament, to the Press, to public opinion. If you really have the successful outcome of these negotiations at heart as much as I have, you are the one who is in a position to give way.'

Unfortunately, though very neat as a debating point, this sort of argument had no lasting effect; and neither did the agreements based on it. They might have done with Mussolini, who sometimes showed a vestige of nineteenth-century business morals in his foreign policy, but they were useless with Göring or Hitler.

This was the basic weakness of Laval's position during the Occupation years. He believed that he was the only man capable of handling the Germans, and in fact he completely misunderstood their character. He would haggle like a peasant, deceive and drive a hard bargain like a peasant; but he also had the peasant's conviction that, once the palm is spat in and the hand-clasp given, the bargain was irrevocable. Not until it was too late did he realise – though his wife never ceased pointing it out to him – that the German is different. Whether raising one arm in salute or both in surrender, he will undertake the most solemn promises and keep them only as long as it suits him to do so.

Laval returned to Paris to find Flandin struggling desperately with a financial crisis. Government spending had been increasing; revenue was falling; unemployment was growing; gold reserves were diminishing. Flandin asked Parliament for plenary powers

to deal with the crisis and was defeated. The Banque de France – and the ‘Two Hundred Families’ behind it – held all the money that the Government needed to meet its commitments; and the Banque de France insisted that the cure for the nation’s illness was not devaluation but deflation. The left wing would not accept this, and in any case was not anxious to get itself involved in unpopular legislation with the elections less than a year away.

Laval was willing and eager to take on the job. He held tightly to every franc he earned and had the peasant’s horror of devaluation, the arbitrary reduction of the value of the sweat-gained money in the old sock. ‘So long as I am in power,’ he once said, ‘I will never order either mobilisation or devaluation.’

On 7 June he presented his Cabinet: slightly right of centre, with a sprinkling of Radical-Socialists led by Herriot. He was granted plenary powers to issue provisional decrees without the previous consent of Parliament, by 324 votes to 160. The large majority may to some extent have indicated the Deputies’ relief at having found a suitable outsider, unattached to any party, whose failure would rebound only on his own head at the elections. But it also revealed – since not even French politicians are entirely cynical in their approach to their country’s problems – a considerable degree of faith in Laval’s ability. Respect was seldom the appropriate word to describe his compatriots’ attitude to Laval, but there were times when he enjoyed their confidence and even their admiration.

Just a week later, he received a most alarming communication from across the Channel. Hitler, who had never been seriously interested in Germany’s claim for the return of its colonies (he had inherited it with all the other claims from his predecessors), had proposed to enter into a naval agreement with Britain. By accepting that the German fleet should not be enlarged to more than thirty-five per cent of the British fleet, he hoped to be given a free hand to build up his army and air force. Britain, little interested in continental complications but desperately concerned about her control of the seas, informed her allies that she was prepared to sign a bilateral agreement with Hitler. On 15 June Italy refused to approve the suggested treaty. On 17 June France did the same. On 18 June Britain signed.

Concealing her intentions from her allies – the negotiations had probably begun in March and it was not until 7 June that the French Government had any official intimation that they were in progress – Britain had by-passed the League of Nations and driven her own horse and Hitler's cart through the tattered Clause 5 of the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler announced: 'This is the most beautiful day of my life!' Laval said cuttingly to Sir Ronald Campbell: 'I may not be a gentleman, but I would never have done a thing like that!'

Britain's signing of the naval agreement in June and her repudiation of the Hoare-Laval plan in December were two things which Laval never forgot or forgave. It would be an exaggeration to say that he hated Britain: he had long ago mastered his hot temper. As a seasoned politician and statesman, he recognised that cheating was part of the game and prided himself on his skill at it; but he was temperamentally more at home with the warm double-dealing of the Latins than with the cool hypocrisy of the Anglo-Saxons. From now on, though he knew that British support must be conserved, it was Italian co-operation that he concentrated on winning.

[8]

ON 17 JULY Laval announced his measures for saving the franc and published the first twenty-nine of his decree-laws. His policy was simply and precisely the one that he pursued in his own business activities. If the firm was running at a loss, it was no use plunging farther and hoping that income would eventually catch up with expenditure. The first thing to do was to put the business on a firm footing by cutting expenditure to match income. It was rather an old-fashioned doctrine, now that both Hitler and Roosevelt were beginning to show that private and public economics do not always obey the same laws.

Laval imposed a ten per cent cut on all Government expenditure, with the exception of public assistance and unemployment pay. All civil servants lost from three to ten per cent of their

pay, pensions and allowances. At the other end of the scale he increased by fifty per cent the tax on all incomes above 80,000 francs a year and introduced a duty on share dividends and all goods and services supplied to the State.

Since he also reduced the cost of gas, electricity and rent, he could claim that some sections of the working class and lower-middle class were slightly better off. But Government officials throughout the country were loudly dissatisfied with the new regulation; when Laval pointed out that the cost-of-living index had dropped by something like twenty per cent since their last salary increase and they were consequently doing very well, they remained quite unimpressed by his mathematics.

Blum, in *Le Populaire*, led the campaign against Laval and his 'poverty decrees'. The ex-soldiers demonstrated indoors at the Salle Bullier; the civil servants demonstrated outdoors at a monster rally in the Place de l'Opéra. In the provinces there was more serious trouble, culminating in riots at Brest and Toulon, where the demonstrators came out into the streets with the red flag.

Laval was unperturbed; when once he made up his mind to carry out a policy, he never lacked courage or determination. But his Radical-Socialist Minister of the Interior, Paganon, soon began to show signs of losing his head.

'There was a nasty business at Toulon,' Laval said later, 'and a telegram from a joker on Paganon's staff didn't help matters. This telegram was handed in at Toulon and, if I remember right, read something like this: "*Terrible bruit dans rue du canon*".' (Which could have meant 'Terrible noise of gunfire in the street' or simply 'Terrible noise in Cannon Street', since Toulon did have a street of that name.)

'Well, here's Paganon saying to me: "My police are getting tiles and paving stones hurled at their heads, and pistol shots as well. They've had enough. They're asking me for authority to use their fire-arms. I shall give it to them."

'I picked up the telephone straight away and asked for the central telephone exchange at Toulon. When the operator answered, I said: "This is the Président du Conseil: give me the sub-prefect of Toulon."

'I was put through to the sub-prefect and said to him: "This is Laval, Président du Conseil. The Minister of the Interior is in my office. We are both in agreement. These disorders have gone on long enough. I don't intend the police and the *Garde Mobile* to be exposed to the brutality of the rioters without being able to reply. This is a question of authority. You will receive written instructions. And these instructions, I can tell you now, will suggest that you fire on the mob. Do you understand?"

"I understand," said the sub-prefect, a fellow named Balley. "I will await the telegram."

'I hung up and turned to Paganon. "Whatever you do, don't send any instructions!" I said. "The people at the telephone exchange will warn their left-wing pals straightaway and everything will be back to normal like a miracle! You need to know how to make use of the telephone."'

On 15 August he took the day off from public affairs and went, as a very proud father, to Josée's wedding. The ceremony was at the basilica of Sainte-Clotilde, close to the Chamber of Deputies. The occasion was both grand and international. The daughter of the Prime Minister of France was marrying a descendant of La Fayette. From Rome the Master-General of the Dominicans came to give the nuptial blessing. From America the aged General Pershing came to stand as witness for the bridegroom.

The bridegroom, Comte René de Chambrun, as a descendant of La Fayette, was automatically entitled to citizenship in the State of Maryland as well as in France and practised as an advocate both in Paris and New York. His father, General de Chambrun, had been liaison officer between Pétain and Pershing during the 1914-18 war and had served with Pétain against Abdel-Krim in 1923. René had been the constant companion of Pershing's young son, Warren, during the last year of the war. He had gone to America with his father and Pétain in 1931 for the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Yorktown and had acted as interpreter and ghost-writer for the Marshal. Pétain, who was very fond of children, had been greatly attached to 'Bunny' de Chambrun and still referred to him as '*le petit lapin*'.

General de Chambrun, now retired, was a director of the Paris

branch of the Chase National Bank. His wife, formerly Clara Longworth, was related to the Roosevelts. René, after studying for several years in the United States, had returned to make his permanent home in Paris, where he had acquired a reputation as a good rugby-player and a gay companion.

'They tell me he plays a good hand of bridge,' said Laval, beaming indulgently, 'and it seems he's getting Josée interested in baccarat now.'

However, he could not dwell long on benevolent contemplation of the happy couple: in Abyssinia events were moving towards a crisis. In May the question had been raised at the League of Nations and Laval had proposed its deferment until 25 August, in the hope that a settlement could be reached before then. Both Britain and France were anxious that they should not be forced to decide between Italy and the League.

To support the League would mean supporting sanctions, and sanctions might lead to war. War with Italy might encourage Japan to move against Britain in the East, and Germany to move against Austria or even France in the West.

On the other hand, failure to support the League might bring down the Governments in both countries. In France Blum was leading the Socialists with the slogan of 'with Mussolini it is not a question of wrongs but of crimes'. In Britain Lord Robert Cecil at the head of the League of Nations Union was conducting a 'Peace Ballot' aimed at forcing the Government to declare war against any nation that broke the League Covenant.

For Laval it was an agonising problem, since the whole of his policy to encircle Germany was based on friendship with Italy. For Baldwin it was perhaps less agonising but no less serious, since a general election was due in November.

Sir Samuel Hoare, who had recently succeeded Simon at the Foreign Office, went to Paris to confer with Laval. 'It was the first time I had met him personally,' he wrote later. 'Whilst his greasy hair, dirty white tie and shifty look did not prepossess me, I could not help admiring the quickness of his versatile mind. More than once, and particularly during the 1931 crisis, when on his own responsibility he had sent to London three billion francs in gold from the Bank of France to steady the value of the

pound, he had been most useful to us. Not only was he head of the French Government, whose co-operation was essential to us, but he was a personal friend of Mussolini and seemed to have considerable influence in Rome.' (Hoare had been more impressed by Laval than he suspected, for Laval had never met Mussolini before his short stay in Rome – nor since.) 'I described at the time the impression that he made on me: "the kind of gipsy who would be doing a deal with Jaspar Petulengro at Barnet Horse Fair".'

Hoare opened the discussion by assuring Laval that the British were as much concerned as the French about German rearmament and that, since it was difficult to get agreement from Germany on the limitation of land armaments, it might be as well to press for an agreement on air forces. He then turned to the Abyssinian problem and said that, although it was important to keep Italy on the Allied side against Germany, the British Government would have to support the League.

Laval agreed that the French Government had the same obligation, and was prepared to honour it. But he still wanted to know how far the British Government proposed to go. Was it as far as sanctions, or was it as far as war? Hoare assured him that there was no intention of going to war. Laval then asked Hoare what effect he thought sanctions would have other than irritating Italy, since neither Japan, Germany nor the United States were members of the League. 'The one thing we must avoid,' he said, 'is Mussolini being driven into the German camp.'

Hoare went on to Geneva, where he made a strong speech in favour of League unity without being at all precise about the extent of the support that Britain was prepared to give to League decisions. Laval had been deeply disturbed by Hoare's suggestion that the question of the German army should be postponed until there had been an agreement about the German air force. Britain, having signed the naval agreement with Hitler, would thus be free from fear of attacks by sea or air, while France had no guarantee against the one form of attack most likely to fall on her – an attack by land.

The Locarno Pact bound Britain to come to France's aid in the event of aggression. But, if Germany invaded Austria, that was

not aggression against any member of the pact. And, if she marched into the Rhineland, which was her territory but permanently demilitarised under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles as a protection for France's eastern frontier, was that aggression, or was it something else?

On 8 September Laval sent a telegram to the French Ambassador in London, telling him to put specific questions to the British Government. The essential one was whether Britain would take any action if Germany took advantage of an Allied quarrel with Italy to attack Austria. 'Would she feel bound to give that guarantee of independence to Austria which she has hitherto refused? I am not unaware of the London Government's dislike of basing engagements on hypotheses; but the eventuality envisaged here has too close a link with the present crisis for us not to have the right to precise information.'

On 11 September he sent a telegram to Mussolini telling him that it was impossible for him to abandon the line of the League of Nations. Mussolini refused to accept it.

On 3 October the Italian campaign in Abyssinia began.

[9]

ON 5 OCTOBER the League decided to apply sanctions against Italy and set up a Committee of Eighteen to decide what form these should take. Mussolini moved troops into Libya and Cyrenaica, threatening Malta; Britain ordered the Home Fleet into the Mediterranean.

Pressed by the British to show support of their move, Laval resorted to his telephone technique in order to soften the blow to Italy. He phoned the French Ambassador in Rome, Comte Charles de Chambrun (René's uncle), and said over the open line:

'England fears a conflict with Italy, a conflict that Sir Samuel Hoare and I have done everything to avoid. We have failed and I deeply regret it. There may be incidents. Call on the Head of the Italian Government. Tell him that, to my great regret, I have been obliged to consent to sanctions and that, in the event of war,

I shall be obliged to take sides with the United Kingdom. Our forces by land, sea and air will go to her assistance.' When Chambrun called the following day, Mussolini had already learned of the message and had been given time for his wrath to subside.

Laval, still trying to find a way out, arranged a talk in Paris between French and British experts, but Baldwin, worried by the results of the Peace Ballot, had committed the Tories to all-out support of the League. The proposals submitted by the British delegation were less favourable to Italy than those which Mussolini had already rejected in June. Laval begged Hoare to be allowed to come to London and talk things over with him.

On 29 November the Committee of Eighteen was to meet to consider the banning of petrol supplies, and this would be a severe blow to Mussolini, possibly severe enough to drive him to the 'mad dog act' which both France and Britain feared. Hoare was not willing to have Laval come to London, but agreed to meet him in Paris on his way to Switzerland, where his doctors had ordered him to go for a rest. Laval asked for the meeting of the Committee of Eighteen to be postponed for a fortnight and Hoare arrived in Paris in the afternoon of Saturday, 7 December. Baldwin, whose policy was to leave negotiations to his Ministers and disown them later, had had only a cursory discussion with Hoare and then sent him off with the vague advice to 'push Laval as far as you can, but on no account get this country into war'. The Tories had come triumphantly out of the November elections and there was no need to go to extremes in keeping their promise to give the League complete support.

Hoare was taken directly to the Quai d'Orsay, where Laval was waiting for him in the ornate office of the Foreign Minister. Hoare, unaccustomed to Laval's free-and-easy ways and the vigorous irreverence of the French Press, was horrified by 'the crowd of reporters and photographers who jostled round Laval's very door with a barrage of flashlights and staring faces. The mob . . . seemed to have taken possession of the Quai d'Orsay as if it had been Versailles in 1789'.

The talks continued through that evening and into the following day, and the two men finally evolved a plan which they

considered might have a chance of being accepted by Mussolini, the Emperor of Abyssinia, and the League. Hoare sent a copy of the proposals to London, recommending that they should be submitted to the League and to the Italian and Abyssinian Governments. Laval agreed that if this solution was not accepted they must face the consequences and arranged for the French General Staff to receive a British military delegation the following day.

The recommendations that they had agreed upon gave Mussolini somewhat more than had been offered to him by the League Committee of Five in September but considerably less than he was demanding. There was probably enough concession in it for him to be able to accept without losing face.

That Sunday evening, Hoare went off to the Engadine, where ill-health and over-enthusiasm in practising for a gold skating medal caused him to faint on the rink and break his nose. Laval prepared to go to Geneva, to announce that a proposal had been drawn up and was being submitted to the League and the two contestants. Meanwhile an official of the Quai d'Orsay handed a copy of the proposal to two French journalists, one of whom was also a correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph*.

Why this leak occurred has never been fully explained. It may have been pure venality, or it may have been because somebody higher in the French Foreign Office, where Laval had many enemies, saw a chance of damaging him. Laval at one time thought that Herriot had a hand in it, and Mussolini persisted in believing that it was a trick by Laval to force his hand. Whatever the reason, the publication of the document in Britain and France produced an outcry against 'surrender to the aggressor' which grew to a raging storm within a few days.

On receipt of the proposals the British Cabinet had agreed to support them. But with Hoare still nursing his broken nose in Switzerland, Baldwin was called upon to defend them in the House. He tried to shield himself by saying: 'My lips are not yet unsealed. Were the troubles over, I would make my case and I guarantee that not a man would go into the lobby against me.'

With the further disclosure that Hoare had written to the British Ambassador in Addis Ababa, instructing him to 'use his

utmost influence' on the Emperor to 'give careful and favourable consideration' to the proposals, the outcry began again and, by the time that Hoare was permitted by his Swiss doctor to fly back to England, the Cabinet was beginning to lose its nerve. Hoare went straight to bed, where he was visited by Chamberlain, to whom he said that he was perfectly prepared to defend the proposals in the House on the ground that this was the minimum concession that Mussolini would accept; that the alternative was war; and that the proposals were to be submitted to the League for its approval.

Hoare was concocting his speech when Baldwin called to see him and to assure him that 'we all stand together'. Later that evening he sent Chamberlain to tell Hoare that his suggested line of defence would not do, and that he would have to admit that the proposals were bad and withdraw them. Hoare refused and offered to resign. Baldwin allowed him to do so.

The British Government's repudiation of the Hoare-Laval plan and of its Foreign Minister as well was a crippling blow to Laval. Since the recall of the Chamber after the expiry of his plenary powers, he had been constantly embattled in Parliament. He had been attacked for his 'poverty decrees' and for his failure to have the Russian pact ratified. The outcry over the 'surrender to the aggressor' encouraged the Radical-Socialists to join forces with the extreme left before it was too late and the elections were upon them.

On 17 December Laval fought off an attack and emerged with a majority of fifty-two. On 27 December Paul Reynaud from the right joined forces with Léon Blum from the left and the majority was down to forty-three. On 23 January Laval returned from Geneva and was met by the five remaining Radical-Socialist Ministers, who handed him their resignations. The Laval Government, the ninety-ninth of the Third Republic, was ended. He was to spend more than four years in the political wilderness. When he returned to office, his German enemies would be in Paris and his Italian friends in Provence.

THE LEAGUE CONTINUED to debate the Abyssinian crisis, France and Britain continued to avoid imposing petrol sanctions, and suddenly one morning it was discovered that the war was over and the King of Italy was Emperor of Abyssinia. Laval, who was now seldom seen in the Senate, though he remained a member of its Foreign Affairs Commission, raged against the *idéologues* who had broken France's partnership with Italy and her best chance of containing Germany. He sulked and told the Senate: 'It seems that those who wanted to preserve the Negus's kingdom for him were criminals and those who've made him lose it are the most estimable people in the world.' But he also worried, for he remained convinced that his policy was the only one to save France, and he the only man to carry it through.

There was plenty for him to worry about. Three weeks after he left office, the new Government, under Albert Sarraut, ratified the Franco-Russian pact; and Hitler replied three weeks later by marching German troops into the Rhineland. The Cabinet met and was told by Gamelin that he could move a few troops a few miles forward into the Rhineland but could not do more without a general mobilisation. The French Government consulted the British Government, who, seeing that the French had done nothing, decided to do nothing themselves. Indeed, a large section of the population in Britain seemed rather pleased that the reasonable Führer had scored off the intransigent French.

The elections of April 1936 returned a strong Popular Front Government, headed by Léon Blum. Blum held views that were diametrically opposed to those of Laval on almost every point, but he lacked Laval's strength of character. Instead of negotiating compromises, as Laval might have done, he accepted compromises that were forced upon him. He gave way on all sides. Under pressure from the Banque de France, he modified his financial policy; following the lead of Britain, he raised sanctions against Italy; again following Britain's lead, he banned the

delivery of arms not only to Franco's right-wing rebels but also to the left-wing Spanish Government.

He was, as Laval never ceased to point out in the Senate corridors, the prisoner of his own ideologies. Democratic Britain was the only European power with whom his conscience would allow him to co-operate fully, but democratic Britain was not yet prepared to take a stand against Fascism. Fearing to take that stand for France alone, Blum, from the highest motives, allowed his country to drift into a position where she had too many enemies, and where her allies were too small or too inadequately armed. There were other Governments to follow his before war came – Chautemps, Blum again, Daladier – but the inevitability of war, and of a French defeat, was foreordained from 1936 onwards by the timidity of the left in France and the irresponsibility of the right in Britain.

Blum's first Government lasted until June 1937. Chautemps's Government, still representing the Popular Front, resigned at the beginning of March 1938. While France was without a Government, Hitler marched into Austria and neither Britain nor France – nor Mussolini – did anything to stop him. Blum formed a Government that lasted for three weeks, and was followed by Daladier. Under the strong man Daladier, the French Government, despite her treaty obligations, docilely followed Chamberlain's lead in handing over Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland – and with it her frontier defences – to Hitler. There was nothing that could save France now.

In March 1939 the Germans occupied Prague. In May Mussolini and Hitler signed the Pact of Steel, under which Italy was to continue her tradition of never finishing a war on the same side as she began it. In August Germany signed a non-aggression pact with Russia and all hope was lost that the Germans might, after overrunning Poland, continue eastward instead of attacking the West. On 1 September 1939 Germany invaded Poland.

Mussolini, who had an agreement with Hitler that he should not be involved in a war before 1942, immediately proposed a standstill and another international conference. The French were prepared to accept; not illogically, since Hitler had until now been given everything he asked for without opposition. The

British Government refused to talk unless Hitler withdrew his troops from Poland. After two days of agitated messages between London and Paris – during which the French claimed that they must be given more time in which to mobilise their army (a problem that Britain was spared, since she had practically none to mobilise) – the French finally agreed to deliver an ultimatum to Germany expiring at 5 p.m. on 3 September, six hours after a similar ultimatum from Britain.

In May 1938 Gamelin had promised the Polish Minister of War that French troops would begin limited offensive operations against Germany on the third day after the declaration of war and would launch an all-out attack on the fifteenth day. By 13 September small French forces had advanced five miles on a fifteen-mile front across the undefended German bulge around Saarbrücken and had then halted, facing the Siegfried Line. Warsaw fell on 28 September and four weeks later all the French troops were back in the Maginot Line. The months of 'phoney war' had begun.

On 10 May 1940 Hitler struck. On the north-eastern front ninety-four French divisions, twenty-two Belgian divisions and ten British divisions faced 135 German divisions. On the ground the odds were about even, except that the French had scattered their tank forces while the Germans had concentrated theirs. In the air the Germans had a superiority of three to one. Except at the top – where General Gamelin, who did not want responsibility, had passed it to General Georges, who could not handle it – the French army was, as always, prepared to fight doggedly to protect its native soil and was led by officers no less efficient than those on the German side.

The French High Command, following the agreed plan, wheeled its armies on the north-eastern frontier into Belgium, where it had every reason to believe that it would oppose the German troops on a broad front and that from that moment the war would be conducted in the usual military style, like a bad game of tennis in which neither player has the skill to take advantage of his opponent's mistakes. Unfortunately for the French, the Germans were led by an amateur, not a professional, and Hitler had overruled his own High Command and insisted on

a plan of attack put forward by a junior general. As the Allied line swung clockwise through Flanders, Hitler's massed armour and aircraft struck at the hinge in the Ardennes; within a fortnight they had carved a corridor across France and had reached the Channel at Boulogne.

Daladier had made way for Paul Reynaud as Prime Minister on the outbreak of the Russo-Finnish war. Reynaud now tried to bolster morale by recalling General Weygand, in his seventies, to replace Gamelin as Commander-in-Chief, and Pétain, in his eighties, as Vice-President of the Council. Weygand ordered the armies in the north to turn southward and cut the German corridor, but bad liaison and distrust between the French and British armies caused this thrust to fail. The retreat towards Dunkirk began on 25 May, and on 27 May Belgium capitulated. On 4 June the last ship left Dunkirk. On 5 June the Germans turned southward against the remaining French forces, who were now outnumbered by three to one. On 9 June the French Government left Paris and, after a halt in the Loire valley, arrived at Bordeaux on 14 June.

During this time relations between France and Britain grew rapidly worse. Weygand accused Gort of not making an honest attempt to thrust southward, and of saving his own men at the expense of the French at Dunkirk. He accused the British troops on the left flank of the southern area of holding back, and the R.A.F. of failing to give air support. When Churchill arrived for a conference near Briare on 11 June, Weygand said that France was facing 'the last quarter of an hour' and that it was essential that Britain should send more troops and restore the air support which she had now withdrawn. Churchill urged the French to continue the fight but admitted that he could not hope to send any more land forces for another three weeks and was not willing to jeopardise Britain's safety by re-committing the R.A.F.

In the days of agonising discussion and decision that followed, Weygand and Pétain insisted that an armistice was inevitable and that, to protect public order, the army must be saved from being cut to ribbons; Reynaud, loyally determined to continue the fight with Britain, deceived both sides by encouraging Churchill to believe that the French Government's will to fight on was greater

than it was, and by failing to carry out his promise to get Churchill to talk with the French Cabinet; Churchill, deeply moved by the torment of France, announced Britain's determination to fight to the end, without making it clear whether or not he was agreeing that the French should ask for an armistice.

[11]

DURING THE FOUR and a half years since Laval had left office, he had continued to develop his business interest on a wide scale in Paris and on a small scale in Chateldon. On his two farms he reared pedigree Southdown sheep and Yorkshire pigs. He completed the establishment of the mineral-water business and built (and himself designed) a new bottling works. He built a concrete platform over the stream and revived the old saw-mill, in which he now employed from twenty-five to thirty workmen making packing-cases and parquet flooring. As with his other ventures, he believed that he could take over the decaying village of Chateldon and set it on its feet again.

Though he did not appear often in the Senate, he was busy in the background, still propounding his conviction that the only hope for France lay in membership of a Latin bloc, in alliance with Mussolini and Franco. He attacked the Government for allowing arms to reach Franco's enemies in Spain, and attacked it equally for accepting the Munich agreement, not only because it disarmed Czechoslovakia and made the defence of Poland impossible but also because it increased Russian suspicion by refusing her a place at the conference table. In March 1939 he attacked Georges Bonnet, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, in a secret session of the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee:

'There is only one means of preventing Hitler from taking all of Europe: that is to make a chain from London to Paris and on through Rome to Belgrade, Budapest, Warsaw, Bucharest and Moscow'. . . Negotiate with Italy. Do you think that she has no interest in this problem and that she does not know that, when Germany is strong enough, her turn will come?

'Charlemagne was a big fellow in his time, a very big fellow; but he believed in God. Today Charlemagne does not believe in anything; he is himself God. There is no precedent for that in history; you can search all your books in vain without finding anything the like of what is happening today. Do you have no feeling that something *compels* you to reach agreement with those who themselves may be Hitler's victims tomorrow?'

He raged without effect. Both Daladier and, later, Reynaud made unofficial advances to Mussolini. Right up to the evacuation of Paris, Laval was plaguing both Daladier and Reynaud to let him go to Rome and talk with Mussolini.

He became more than ever convinced that France was being sacrificed to party politics and 'international ideologies'. His cynical distrust of the left wing was increased when he received a visit at Chateldon from a Russian sent by Stalin. The Russian was accompanied by a young woman who, he said, could not speak French. Laval suspected that this was untrue and, to test it, told an extremely rude story; the blush on the young Russian woman's cheeks confirmed his suspicions. The pair had come to make him a most unexpected proposal: if he cared to make an attempt to take over the Popular Front and swing it entirely into line with Russian policy, Stalin would guarantee the full support of the French Communist Party.

He had long been in touch with the *Croix de Feu* and other right-wing action groups, though perhaps to no greater extent than he was in touch with all other groups. As he watched the French Government stumble towards a war for which the country was not prepared, his dislike of parliamentary government grew; and with it grew the conviction that sooner or later a stronger form of government would be necessary. That he saw himself as a dictator is highly doubtful: he knew that he had neither the appearance nor the personality for that sort of demagoguery. But he was undoubtedly planning a form of government in which he would be the moving spirit with some venerable figure as head of the State. And what more venerable figure than Marshal Pétain?

Laval had first met Pétain (and the Chambruns) in America in 1931. He had served with him in Doumergue's National Govern-

ment in 1934. He had had obvious links with him, through René de Chambrun, ever since Josée's marriage in 1935. From 1936 onwards, when Pétain was proposed as candidate for the Presidency of the Republic but refused to stand, there had been recurring suggestions that the Marshal should be brought to the head of the Government in the hope of rallying the people; and he might well have been widely accepted since he was credited with liberal views because of his moderate handling of the 1917 mutinies and the fact that, unlike many army officers, he had a marked distaste for attending church and was married to a divorced woman.

Laval opposed the declaration of war and declared that it was illegal, since Parliament had been asked to vote only on the granting of extra credits and not on the specific question of war. After the German onslaught had begun, he was more than ever in favour of bringing the war to an end as soon as possible.

He left Paris on 9 June (after having arranged to print *Paris-Soir*, *Match* and various other newspapers and magazines on his presses at Clermont-Ferrand) and drove to Chateldon. There Josée tried to persuade him to take the family to America, where René, having escaped from Dunkirk, had been sent to President Roosevelt with a final appeal from President Lebrun. His wife argued desperately with him against trying to enter a Government which was already being blamed for declaring war and would shortly be blamed for asking for an armistice. He refused to listen to them. He was certain that his great moment had arrived. He would take over the affairs of France, as he had taken over the affairs of so many other businesses, and set them in order again.

His wife, still protesting, drove with him to Bordeaux. They arrived in the evening of 14 June, to find a scene of panic and confusion. Government officials, having struggled through the millions of refugees that now blocked the roads, were requisitioning accommodation. The Cabinet and principal Ministries were set up in the Rue Vital-Carles, with police barriers at either end. The streets were packed with cars and people sleeping in them. Laval set up his headquarters in a small office in the town hall, put at his disposal by Adrien Marquet, the deputy mayor, a local dentist and leading figure in the

Neo-Socialist Party. About a hundred Members of Parliament had arrived and had been given a hall in the Rue des Trois-Conils; during the following days their number was doubled.

The Cabinet was arguing over three possibilities: an armistice, with the Government remaining in power in France; a capitulation, with the Government resigning and allowing the country to be administered by Ministers of State and civil servants under German occupation authorities; a capitulation and the withdrawal of the Government to North Africa or Britain. Reynaud, who had earlier asked for the creation of a redoubt in Brittany but had been convinced that it was militarily impossible, was in favour of the Government going into exile and continuing the fight. This was flatly and violently opposed by Weygand, since it would involve the army laying down its arms without an armistice, a dishonour which he would not accept. Pétain had already made it clear that he was in favour of an armistice and would not himself leave France.

By the time that Laval made his first contact with Pétain, on the evening of 15 June, the majority of the Cabinet had swung round in favour of a suggestion from Chautemps that the Germans should be asked what would be their terms for an armistice and, if the terms were dishonourable, the Cabinet should consider the question again. Reynaud rightly seeing that, once such an approach had been made, it was almost inevitable that an armistice would be agreed upon, offered his resignation to the President of the Republic, but Lebrun refused to accept it. Reynaud informed the British Government that the French Government wished to open negotiations with the Germans.

Churchill was again in the agonising position that he had faced in his earlier conversations with Reynaud. There were now no British troops left in France, and Britain had shown that she saw no hope of a French recovery by withdrawing the R.A.F. In these circumstances, could he still insist that the French should carry out the terms of the alliance and fight to the last man? The British Ambassador during the course of the afternoon of 16 June handed Reynaud two telegrams giving the British Government's consent to the armistice negotiations on condition that the French fleet sailed for British ports.

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Reynaud did not communicate this immediately to the Cabinet and a short time afterwards Sir Ronald Campbell withdrew the two telegrams and substituted the British Government's offer of a union of the two countries. At a meeting at 4 p.m. the Cabinet rejected it. Shattered by the devastating blows from the German army, they believed, as did most of the rest of the world, that Britain could not hold out for more than a few weeks. Resentful of what they considered to be Britain's lack of support and desertion in the battle of France, they suspected that, if she did manage to hold out, she would use the union to lay her hands on the French Empire and colonies overseas. Reynaud resigned and Lebrun invited Pétain to form a Government. The Marshal immediately drew his list of Ministers from his pocket.

Pétain sent for Laval at 10.30 that evening and offered him the post of Minister of Justice. Laval, who could not carry out his self-appointed mission as the saviour of France unless he was the principal negotiator with the Germans, insisted that he should be appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs. He argued with the Marshal and with the Foreign Minister designate, Paul Baudouin, who had until now been the head of Reynaud's secretariat. Eventually Baudouin gave way and the Marshal agreed to Laval's appointment; but by now Weygand had arrived on the scene, protesting that Laval, whom he detested personally, was known to be pro-Mussolini and anti-British and that his appointment would be an unnecessary provocation to the British. The Marshal changed his mind once more and Laval stumped off in anger, refusing to accept any Cabinet post at all.

Shortly after noon on 17 June, Pétain broadcast to the French people, telling them that the Government had asked for armistice terms. But now a new proposal had been put forward: that Pétain, President of the Council, should remain in France as a sort of regent, while the President of the Republic, the Presidents of the Senate and the Chamber, and the Vice-President of the Council, Chautemps, moved to North Africa to constitute a free Government there.

While this project was being discussed, the Germans crossed the Loire and began to move south. That night, two hundred and fifty people were killed or wounded in an air raid on Bordeaux.

During the day, the British First Lord of the Admiralty, First Sea Lord and Secretary for the Colonies flew into Bordeaux to plead again that the French fleet should sail for British ports. This was now evidently impossible, since the Germans would have immediately refused to negotiate an armistice; but Admiral Darlan, the newly appointed Minister of Marine, pledged his word that the French ships would never be allowed to fall into the hands of the Axis powers.

At the news that the President of the Republic was intending to leave for Algeria, Laval burst into violent action. He feared that the Germans would continue their advance into North Africa and that Pétain and the Ministers who remained in France would not be recognised as the legal Government: that, in fact, the war would not be ended and there would be no room for negotiation. He harangued meetings of Deputies and Senators on the afternoons of 19 and 20 June, and at 10 p.m. on the 20th led a parliamentary delegation to the Marshal to tell him that they had no intention of leaving.

At 11.15 a.m. on 21 June the Germans wirelessly instructions for the French plenipotentiaries to leave that afternoon. One of the more important arguments in favour of the Head of State leaving for North Africa – that the Germans might capture Bordeaux before the armistice talks had begun – was now diminished. Soon after lunch, Laval led an excited deputation of Deputies and Senators into Lebrun's office in the Prefecture and announced that they represented more than a hundred parliamentarians who demanded that the President of the Republic should cancel his decision to leave.

Pouring out a torrent of words and not always treating the President with the respect that was due to him, Laval repeated his arguments over and over again: that the Government should not be allowed to continue the hopeless war from North Africa; that the division of the Government would deprive the part remaining in France of its legality and authority; that only two men – Weygand and Pétain – were qualified to say whether an armistice was necessary and that neither the President nor the other Ministers had the right to oppose them; that their duty was to save France, and that they would not save it by leaving it. 'If

you want to leave – leave! But you can do it only as a private citizen. Resign!’ Lebrun decided to remain.

The Germans presented their armistice terms at Rethondes, on the same spot and in the same railway carriage in which they had had to acknowledge their own defeat in 1918. France was to be divided into two zones; three-fifths of the country, a broad belt in the north including Paris and a narrower strip down the length of the Atlantic coast, was to be occupied by German troops and France was to pay the cost of this occupation. The army was to be demobilised, the air-force equipment handed over, the navy interned in French ports under Axis supervision. The French Government asked that the air-force equipment should be stock-piled in French hands and that the fleet should be interned in North African ports. The Germans agreed to the first point, refused the second.

On the evening of 22 June the armistice was signed. The cease-fire came into effect shortly after midnight on 25 June, after France had signed a similar armistice with Italy, who had leapt into the fray a fortnight before when the German victory was certain.

A few hours after the armistice had been signed at Rethondes, Pétain sent for Laval and offered him the post of Minister of State. This was still not the Foreign Ministry that Laval wanted, but, since its scope was not limited by any specific duties, he accepted. The Marshal, whose susceptibilities had been wounded by Laval’s previous refusal, probably made this offer because he had been impressed by Laval’s skilful and energetic handling of the Members of Parliament; and – as he remarked to some of the other Ministers – he would be less of a danger inside the Government than outside it.

The Government left Bordeaux on 29 June. After a brief halt at Clermont-Ferrand, which Laval had suggested as the seat of government because it was also the seat of his printing works, but which proved to lack sufficient accommodation, the cavalcade of cars moved on to a small, elegant town in the middle of France which until then had for most people been no more than the name on a bottle of mineral water: Vichy.

THE MARSHAL AT THE HELM

[1]

IT WAS THE first of July and a brilliant sun shone on the countryside that Laval loved best in France: his native Auvergne. He was in the best of spirits as he drove from Clermont-Ferrand to Vichy. Not much more than a week before he had been a nonentity, a Senator who had lost power four years ago and did not look like returning to office again; now the Marshal had appointed him Vice-President of the Council, sharing the office with Chautemps, and had agreed to his undertaking one of those monumental tasks of persuasion in which he delighted: talking several hundred Senators and Deputies into voting themselves out of existence.

His spirits were so high that he did not even frown when the clutch of the car jammed on the Pont de Bellerive just before they reached the tree-shaded Nouveau Parc on the right bank of the Allier. Normally he would have regarded it as an ill omen, for he was grossly superstitious in many things: he feared the number thirteen; he believed that blue was a lucky colour for him and preferred blue suits, blue carpets, blue curtains; he had a pet astrologer, who would come to his office and consult the cards for him or draw up a horoscope (which always predicted that, however death might come, it would not be by violent means).

Now, with a jaunty lift to his usually slow walk, he set off to cover the remaining kilometre on foot. The crowds, basking in the four-o'clock sunshine, had already seen the Marshal drive by.

As they recognised the unmistakable white tie and the swarthy face, they raised their hats and broke into little bursts of hand-clapping. Beaming, waving his black walking-stick and shaking proffered hands, a successful man of the people from his white-topped, patent-leather buttoned boots to the grey homburg that still seemed to sit incongruously on his black peasant head, Laval inspired them with confidence against the gloomy days to come: *malin, rusé*, the epitome of the quick-thinking practical French intelligence that would save whatever could be saved from the invaders, while the Marshal from his lofty eminence re-established the moral superiority of France.

He walked through the streets of villas and large hotels to the Hôtel du Parc, which overlooked the Old Park and its galleries and promenades, the casino on the right, the covered hall with three mineral springs on the left. This was the principal seat of government, though many Ministries were scattered in other hotels through the town. Laval's offices were strategically placed at the end of the second floor, with the Marshal's suite on the floor above and the Foreign Office, still completing its move from Clermont, occupying most of the floor below.

Clerks and secretaries and heads of departments jostled orderlies and policemen who had been drafted to carry up files and equipment and personal luggage. Connecting doors were being taken off their hinges and typewriters and tables wedged between wardrobes and washstands. There was an air of make-shift confusion, the suggestion of a hurried and badly organised business convention. The assumption at the moment, and for many months to come, was that Vichy was only a temporary staging post on the Government's way back to Paris or Versailles. The Government never did leave, but the air of impermanence remained, as if everything that was done here would one day be wiped out with a gigantic sponge.

Laval had a habit of counting his footsteps: if they came to an even number, 'everything will fit into place'; if they did not, 'we'll have to begin all over again'. Had he counted them on his walk from the Pont de Bellerive to the Hôtel du Parc, he would have found them distinctly odd.

His office contained nothing but a telephone on a small round

table. Placing his brief-case on the table, he began to work – or to talk with his staff, which was his usual method of work – while on the floor above the Marshal was already in conference with Alibert.

Raphaël Alibert, a large and loquacious man, had formerly been a professor of constitutional law and a member of the Conseil d'État. He was ambitious, conceited, unstable and unsuccessful. He had first been introduced to the Marshal in 1936 by common acquaintances in the Cagoule, and the old man had been impressed by Alibert's high-flown ideas and his contempt for Parliament.

Later the Marshal was to revise his views. 'I liked him very much, but he gave me a great deal of bad advice,' he said. And the Marshal's personal doctor, young Bernard Ménétrel, himself not conspicuously level-headed, diagnosed Alibert as 'suffering from megalomania, with a certain tendency towards disequilibrium, characterised by periods of excitation alternating with periods of mental depression'. When the Marshal got rid of him, he was seen walking along outside the Hôtel du Parc, pushing a perambulator laden with his personal files and shaking his fist threateningly at the heavens.

Today he was in one of his periods of happy excitation. Everything appeared to be going his way. The Marshal had taken him on as Under-Secretary of State at Bordeaux and he enjoyed all the privileges of a king-maker, though his ambitions went beyond that. 'I shall come out of this either dead or a dictator,' he said.

The authoritarian constitution that he was planning was highly acceptable to Pétain and Weygand. They were soldiers and could never have enough discipline, at any rate for those below them. Laval was at least momentarily in favour and undoubtedly still suffering from the resentment against Parliament that had made him exclaim: '*Elle m'a vomé; je vais la vomir à mon tour!*' The fact that a move was on foot to change the constitution was already common knowledge, and at that moment William Bullitt, the American Ambassador, was sending a telegram to the State Department informing them that the Government was considering setting up a semi-dictatorial state:

'Pétain, Weygand and Laval all believe that, if it should be introduced in France before the peace, France would obtain much better terms than could be obtained under a parliamentary regime.'

But, though many Ministers approved of the project, there were several who proved to be lukewarm when Laval broached it at the inner Cabinet meeting the following morning. Their hesitancy sprang not from any dislike of change but from doubt whether the change could be made. Under the existing constitution, any alteration had to be ratified by a majority vote of the two Houses of Parliament sitting together as the National Assembly. It seemed highly improbable that Laval could persuade some six or seven hundred parliamentarians, ninety per cent of whom disliked or distrusted him, to lay aside their privileges, their perquisites and their opportunities for graft, and to sign their own dismissal notices.

And behind the doubts of Laval's fellow-Ministers lay their deep animosity. They disliked him for what he was, what he did and how he did it. They resented his power over other people and profoundly hoped they would not have to be indebted to it. Apart from a handful of former parliamentarians, whom he was shortly to get rid of, Pétain had chosen his advisers from technicians, permanent civil servants, generals and admirals, men who throughout their careers had despised the Ministers from whom they had to take their orders. At last given the opportunity to demonstrate their superior intelligence and integrity as Ministers themselves, they still found themselves out-manceuvred, out-talked and treated with open contempt by Laval.

He referred to them as 'a pack of debutants', 'functionaries who think they're cut out to be politicians'; he refused to discuss his plans with them and paid little attention to their opinions. At Cabinet meetings he would often turn to a fellow-Minister and, with a smile that failed to compensate for the rough edge to his voice, say: 'Oh, do shut up! You don't know anything about it.'

In a Government that grew more bright with uniforms as the months went by, he remained an incorrigible civilian. When the Marshal, in brisk military fashion, announced: 'We no longer

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Illustrations

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PIERRE LAVAL



Laval in his early days at the bar.



The poet and the engineer of peace: Laval and Briand after their visit to Hindenburg, September 1931.





Partners against Germany: Laval, Mussolini, MacDonald and Flandin at Stresa, April 1935.



Wedding group, 15 August 1935 : General de Chambrun, René de Chambrun, Josée and Pierre Laval.



The uneasy alliance: Laval with Marshal Pétain in the garden of the Pavillon Sévigné, Vichy.



The go-between : Laval with Fernand de Brinon (wearing dark hat) outside the Hôtel du Parc.



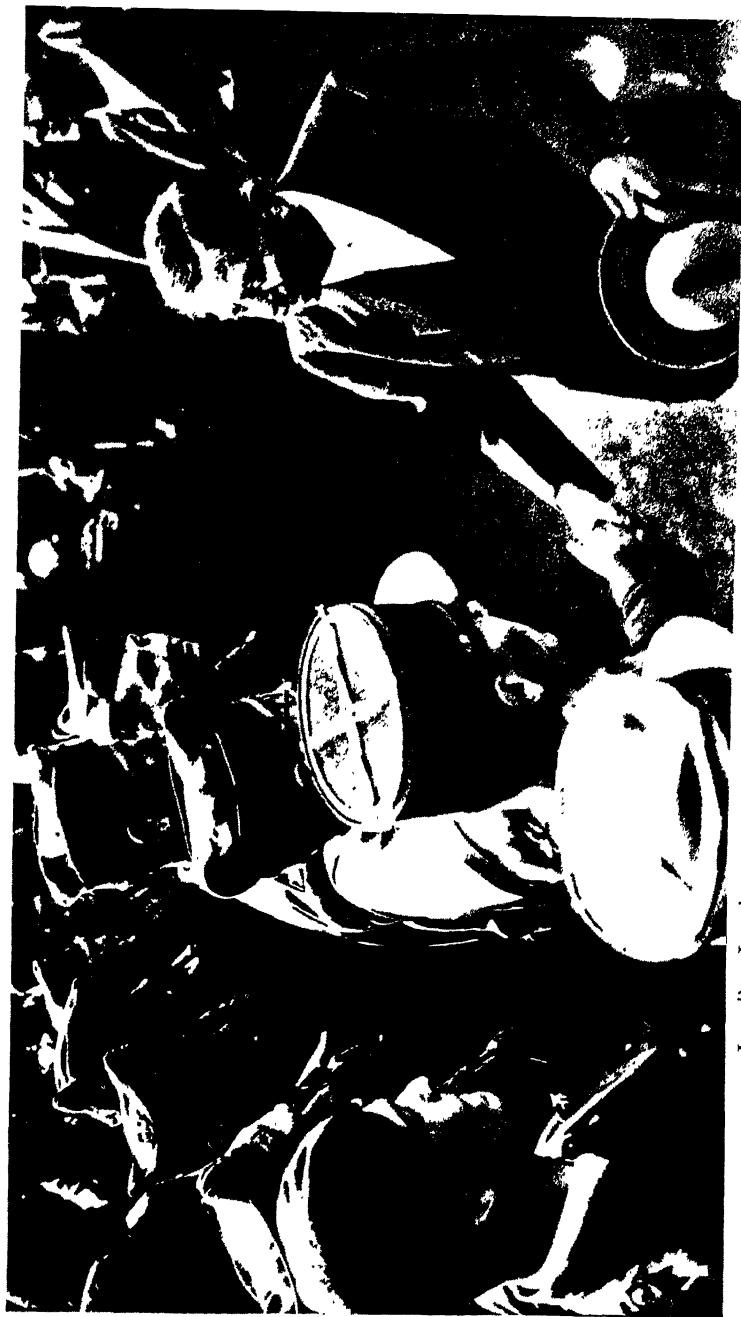
Montoire : Laval is received by Hitler in his private train, October 1940.



Versailles: Mme Laval and Josée de Chambrun arrive at the hospital



The collaborators: Laval with Ribbentrop, Hitler, Ciano and Göring.



La relève: Laval greets returning French prisoners of war at Compiègne station.



The road back: Laval and (below) his wife, after being handed over to the Americans at Linz, July 1945.





The trial, October 1945: Laval protests and (below) consults Maître Baraduoc.

come to the Council to argue, but to present our reports in turn,' Laval grinned and growled and chattered and interrupted as freely as ever. At almost every meeting he was embattled in argument with Weygand, who sat opposite him, his face as taut as a sour lemon, his body as menacing as a cocked rifle, often giving as good as he got. 'You wallow in defeat like a dog in filth,' he snapped at Laval one day. It was unfair; nobody felt France's defeat more deeply than Laval. But it was true that he got pleasure out of trying to solve the problems which defeat had brought with it. For this he was not to be forgiven.

He even upset them by his personal habits. He left a trail of cigarette ash wherever he went. The Marshal complained that he blew smoke in his face. He supped his coffee and soup with audible enjoyment. He had a baffling habit of cutting the crust off his cheese, eating the cheese and then eating the crust. When dealing with a cherry tart, he would begin by spitting the stones into his hand, then directly into his plate, then, if in a hurry to say something, spit them over his shoulder on to the floor.

While talking to callers in his office, he would extract from his pocket a complicated little instrument with which he slowly and appreciatively cleaned his teeth, his nails and his ears. His language was often frank to the point of coarseness. One of his expressed objections to his new colleagues was that they always had too sharp a crease in their trousers.

He didn't talk like a gentleman, he didn't act like a gentleman, he didn't dress like a gentleman, he didn't look like a gentleman. He was a permanent source of irritation and dismay.

On the evening of 2 July Baudouin, who knew that Laval coveted his job and who himself had an eye on Laval's, called to see President Lebrun in his new official residence at the Pavillon Sévigné, a hotel in the older part of the town. They talked for an hour and three-quarters, deploring Laval's influence over Pétain and discussing his chances of getting the measure approved by the National Assembly – which they both considered to be very slight. They agreed that a refusal by the Assembly would have a harmful effect on Pétain's prestige, and Baudouin remarked: 'If there is a reverse, the reverse must be that of Pierre Laval alone, for the formation of the scheme and the responsibility are his.'

Sharp at 9.30 the following morning, Baudouin called on the Marshal and gave him a note urging that, if the Assembly accepted Laval's proposal, the Marshal must make it clear that he alone had received supreme authority from the nation, and that he had received it direct from the Assembly. If Laval failed, he should be thrown out of the Government.

There were several factors on Laval's side in his coming struggle with the Deputies and Senators. The most important was the parliamentarians' own dejection and sense of guilt. Most of them accepted, if they did not openly admit, that the defeat and consequent terror and confusion which France had lived through during the past six weeks had been brought about by their own shortcomings.

They were grateful that the armistice had put an end to the horror, and more than satisfied that the Marshal should be ready to shoulder the responsibility for the future. Later they would collect themselves and deny all this, but at the moment they were in the mood to admit that it was parliamentary government, or the weaknesses and abuses of parliamentary government as it had been practised in France, that had brought their country so low.

They tramped the town, trying to find accommodation where very little existed, fighting for rooms with the place-seekers, lobbyists and intriguers who had flocked to Vichy. The town was already overflowing with the staffs of Paris banks and insurance companies that had been evacuated there. It even had a numerous rearguard of its usual guests: hard-faced elderly women in search of rejuvenation and elderly gentlemen who had abused their livers, determinedly parading from one spring to another, dangling from their arms the little wicker cases that contained their graduated medicine glasses.

Having at last fixed themselves up with half- or quarter-shares of rooms, the newcomers drifted to the two conference halls that Laval had set aside for them: the Petit Casino for the Deputies, the Salle des Sociétés Médicales for the Senators. Here he intended to harangue them every day until they were ready to do as he wished. But first there was an intervention from the world outside, startling in its horror, quite unrelated to the argument

that was about to begin, yet seeming to support much that Laval was saying: that France was now entirely alone and must find herself a strong Government if she were to survive.

The Marshal and three other Ministers were lunching with Laval at Chateldon when the first news arrived, on 3 July. The message came from Admiral Gensoul, commander of the French Atlantic Fleet, at present in harbour at Mers-el-Kebir, just outside Oran, where, in accordance with the armistice terms, he was engaged in paying off the larger part of his crews. It was timed at 8.45 that morning and ran:

'British force composed of three armoured cruisers, one aircraft-carrier, some cruisers and destroyers, off Oran, has sent me an ultimatum: "Sink your vessels within six hours or we will force you to do so". My reply was: "French vessels will reply to force with force".'

The message had been delayed because the French navy was no longer allowed to use its wireless. It had gone by land-line to Algiers, by cable to Marseilles and by land-line to Darlan's rear headquarters at Nérac. There Darlan's Chief of Staff, Admiral Le Luc, had immediately ordered all French units in the Mediterranean to proceed to Oran and support Admiral Gensoul. Le Luc had then managed to get in touch with Darlan, who was looking for suitable buildings to set up his headquarters in Clermont, and Darlan had confirmed the order.

Darlan arrived at Vichy at 3.30 in the afternoon and found Pétain, Laval, Weygand and Baudouin waiting for him in the Marshal's small conference room overlooking the Park and the Rue Petit; they were silent and thunderstruck. They approved Darlan's confirmation of Le Luc's orders and agreed that Baudouin should send a strong note of protest to London while Weygand got in touch with the German armistice commission and asked for a suspension of French naval and aerial disarmament.

As for Gensoul, there was nothing to do but wait for further news from him. Darlan explained that they must expect the greater part of his fleet to be destroyed. His vessels, tied up in harbour and with most of the crews either on leave or being paid off, would scarcely have time to get steam up to manoeuvre or escape. The ultimatum would by now have expired. For the first

time for 125 years, British guns were firing on the French.

[2]

FORCE H, UNDER the command of Vice-Admiral Sir James Somerville – the battle-cruiser *Hood*, aircraft-carrier *Ark Royal*, battleships *Valiant* and *Resolution*, two cruisers and eleven destroyers – had left Gibraltar before dawn. It was directly under orders from the Admiralty, with whom Somerville, with the support of Admiral Andrew Cunningham, C.-in-C. Mediterranean, and Sir Dudley North, commanding the North Atlantic station, had been arguing for several days about the unwisdom of presenting an ultimatum to the French fleet. Darlan, before the French naval codes were handed over to the Germans on 24 June, had carried out the promise that he gave to the First Lord of the Admiralty at Bordeaux a week earlier and had ordered that all French ships should be scuttled rather than allow them to fall into enemy or foreign hands. On 24 June Admiral Gensoul had given his word of honour to Sir Dudley North that his ships would never be surrendered intact to the Germans or Italians.

While Force H circled to the north, Captain C. S. Holland of *Ark Royal*, who had served as Naval Attaché in Paris, spoke fluent French and was acquainted with Gensoul, arrived off Mers-el-Kebir in the destroyer *Foxhound* and asked permission to enter the harbour. He signalled a message from Somerville to Gensoul: 'The British Admiralty has sent Captain Holland to confer with you. The British navy hopes their proposal will enable you and your glorious French navy to range yourself side by side with them. In these circumstances, your ships would remain yours and no one need have any anxiety for the future. A British fleet is at sea off Oran waiting to welcome you.'

On seeing *Foxhound*, Gensoul had sent his barge with his Flag Lieutenant, Lieutenant-Commander Dufay, to greet Holland, but as soon as the signal was translated he refused – as Somerville had predicted – to hold discussions with Holland under threat of force. He ordered *Foxhound* to withdraw and Holland was compelled to hand over the ultimatum to Dufay, himself remaining outside the harbour mouth in *Foxhound's* motor-boat.

Dufay returned to Gensoul's flagship, the battle-cruiser *Dunkerque*, with the ultimatum. This, after declaring that the British Government no longer believed that the French Government was in a position to carry out its promise that the French fleet should not fall into enemy hands, continued:

'In these circumstances, H.M. Government have instructed me to demand that the French fleet now at Mers-el-Kebir and Oran shall act in accordance with one of the following alternatives:

'A. Sail with us and continue to fight for victory against the Germans and Italians.

'B. Sail with reduced crews under our control to a British port. The reduced crews will be repatriated at the earliest moment. If either of these courses is adopted by you we will restore your ships to France at the end of the war, or pay full compensation if they are damaged meanwhile.

'C. Alternatively, if you feel bound to stipulate that your ships should not be used against Germans or Italians, since this would break the armistice, then sail them with us with reduced crews to some French port in the West Indies – Martinique, for instance – where they can be demilitarised to our satisfaction, or perhaps be entrusted to the United States of America, and remain safely until the end of the war, the crews being repatriated.

'If you refuse these fair offers, I must with profound regret require you to sink your ships within six hours. Finally, failing the above, I have the orders of His Majesty's Government to use whatever force may be necessary to prevent your ships from falling into German or Italian hands.'

Gensoul read the message with mounting rage and despair: rage because, though the French army had always regarded the British army with distrustful contempt, the French navy's attitude towards the Royal Navy, which for so many centuries had overshadowed it, was one of envy often bordering on hatred; despair because he was confronted with the almost certain destruction of his fleet.

Side by side with the *Dunkerque*, moored by their sterns to the grand jetty and facing towards the mainland, were the battleship *Provence*, the battle-cruiser *Strasbourg*, the battleship *Bretagne* and the seaplane-carrier *Commandant Teste*; across the harbour,

moored by their bows and also facing landward, were the fleet destroyers *Volta*, *Mogador*, *Terrible*, *Lynx*, *Tigre* and *Kersaint*.

Gensoul ordered all ships to recall their crews, raise steam and prepare for action. He sent his first signal to the French Ministry of Marine at Nérac and also sent Dufay back to Holland to repeat Darlan's orders of 24 June and his own pledge to Sir Dudley North. He suggested that he should disarm his fleet where it lay, at Mers-el-Kebir. Somerville had already suggested this solution to the Admiralty, which had approved it only on the condition that it was completed within six hours – a physical impossibility.

Shortly afterwards, Gensoul sent Holland a further message for Somerville, pointing out that 'the first shot fired against us will have the practical effect of setting the whole French fleet against Great Britain: a result which will be diametrically opposed to that which the British are seeking'. On learning that Holland had reported that the French ships were raising steam, the First Sea Lord sent wireless instructions to Somerville to sow mines across the harbour mouth.

By the time that Gensoul's ships had raised steam, the first aircraft from the *Ark Royal* had begun to lay the mines. Even had he wished to do so, it was now impossible for Gensoul to comply with any of the first three proposals in the ultimatum within the allotted time. Somerville signalled: 'If you accept my proposals, hoist a square white flag at your mainmast. If not, I shall open fire.'

Gensoul replied to Somerville that he did not intend to sail and that he was ready to receive Holland 'for honourable discussions'. For more than an hour Holland talked with Gensoul in the Admiral's cabin on the *Dunkerque*. He reported to Somerville: 'Admiral says crew being reduced and if threatened by enemy would go to Martinique or U.S.A., but this is not quite our proposal. Can get no nearer.' Somerville had received another urgent command from the Admiralty: 'Settle matters quickly or you will have reinforcements to deal with.' He sent a final signal to Gensoul telling him that unless one of the British proposals was accepted within a quarter of an hour 'it will be necessary to sink your ships'.

The first British salvo fell on the jetty. Gensoul gave the order

to return fire and signalled to Nérac: 'Battle engaged with the British forces.' The second British salvo fell among the French ships and for thirteen minutes shells continued to rain on the trapped vessels. Then Gensoul signalled: 'All my vessels out of action; I ask you to cease fire.' Somerville replied: 'Hoist the agreed signal.' The French found an off-white counterpane with pale blue stripes, which they hoisted. It was recognised and the shelling ceased.

The *Strasbourg*, unable to saw through her mooring chains, had dragged them away and succeeded in charging out of the harbour in the dense smoke, without colliding with any of the other vessels or striking a mine; with *Volta*, *Terrible* and *Tigre* she made off for Toulon before any of the British ships, manœuvring westward to avoid fire from the shore batteries, could close with her. The *Dunkerque*, slow in casting off her chains, failed to pick up enough speed and was hit by four fifteen-inch shells after having fired forty rounds herself. She ran ashore out of control.

The *Provence* was struck by the same salvo as the *Dunkerque*, holed and set on fire at the stern. The carrier, *Commandant Teste*, escaped injury. The *Mogador*, hit by a fifteen-inch shell as she dashed out of the harbour, had sixty feet of her stern carried away, but her water-tight compartments kept her afloat and she anchored just outside the harbour entrance. On the *Bretagne* 800 men were killed; many of them were trapped in the water-tight compartments after the ship had sunk and died from suffocation. On the *Dunkerque* 250 men were killed.

Throughout the following week the British navy continued to capture or sink all French vessels that it came upon. Before dawn on 3 July armed boarding parties took over all the French ships which had taken refuge in British ports after Dunkirk or had escaped to them when the Germans were on the point of capturing Cherbourg and Lorient. There were some scuffles, notably on the great submarine *Surcouf*, at Plymouth, where one man on each side was killed, but for the most part the surprise was complete. The ships were handed over to General de Gaulle, but the majority of the crews refused to serve under him and were repatriated via Lisbon.

On 4 July Admiral Esteva announced from Tunis that the ships at Mers-el-Kebir were in sufficiently good shape to be repaired, a stupid exaggeration which brought an attack from torpedo-carrying aircraft of the *Ark Royal* at dawn on 6 July. When the air-raid warning was given, the crews of those vessels which were still manned were called on deck to be taken ashore by two tugs. The first attack sank the tug *Esterel* and the second exploded the fifty depth-charges that it was carrying. The explosion tore a hole in the side of the *Dunkerque* and a great fountain of water swept men from the decks of the other ships in the harbour.

The funeral of those men whose bodies had been found had taken place the previous day. Now the total casualties had risen to 1,297 killed and 351 wounded. The dreadful decision that had been forced on Somerville had been carried out at a dreadful price. It had also been a dreadful risk: that the remainder of the French fleet in Toulon might have been handed over to Germany, or even that France might have declared war on Britain, thus opening the whole of her Mediterranean coast and that of North Africa to the Germans and Italians.

[3]

AT 8.30 ON the morning of 4 July Laval, Darlan and Baudouin gathered in the Marshal's study. Darlan, trembling with rage now that he had full details of what had happened at Mers-el-Kebir, obtained the Marshal's authority to order the warships at Algiers to rendezvous with the *Strasbourg* and attack Force H on its way back to Gibraltar. He also instructed all French naval vessels to round up any British merchant ships that they encountered and to attack any British warships. He was in a mood for all-out war with Britain, though he modified his attitude as time went on, partly under pressure from the others and partly because he realised that, with the remains of the fleet intact, he had the most powerful bargaining counter of any man in France. At the moment he agitated strongly for reprisals – an attack on Sierra Leone or the Gambia, an appeal for Italian help to bomb

Gibraltar or Alexandria – and that night a small force of aeroplanes took off from Algeria and dropped bombs in the harbour at Gibraltar.

Laval took little part in the discussions. His interest lay in what was happening in France and he was burning to press on with the job of getting the Government the stronger powers which would enable him to act as 'the official receiver for our bankrupt country'. At the Council of Ministers later that morning, he sat impatiently through the protracted discussion of the Mers-el-Kebir incident and then read the motion which Alibert had drafted and which he was to place before the Assembly:

'Sole article: the National Assembly gives complete power to the Government of the Republic, under the authority and signature of Marshal Pétain, President of the Council, to promulgate by one or more acts a new constitution for the French State. This constitution shall guarantee the rights of Work, Family and Country. It shall be ratified by the assemblies which it will create.'

Having read it, he looked round the table and in his usual cavalier way said: 'I apologise for not letting you open a discussion on the subject; I've got sixty Senators waiting for me to whom I must give explanations.'

A few minutes later he was addressing the Senators in the hall of the Sociétés Médicales. He used shock tactics and harsh facts: Parliament must be dissolved and the constitution reformed; if Parliament did not consent, the Germans would impose a constitution in line with that of the totalitarian states and would occupy the whole of France. He left them deep in thought.

On 5 July he met eighty Deputies in the theatre of the Little Casino, the stage set with a chair for the President of the Chamber, a desk for speakers, the members of the Government seated in the front row of the stalls. A Parisian Deputy, Marcel Héraud, opened the debate with an attack on Weygand, who had been reported as telling the troops at Clermont that they must hold themselves ready for 'cleaning-up operations in the interior'. Héraud protested that it was not the Republic that had failed but the men who ruled it. 'We must not tolerate threats that are directed against the régime.'

Georges Monnet, a Socialist and friend of Léon Blum, stood up in his seat and shouted at Laval: 'You ask us to rally round Marshal Pétain. We willingly agree. But there is one point that concerns us and on which we want a precise answer: what happens if, after the Marshal has been invested with complete power, he meets with an accident?' The question was greeted with a hubbub of approval, prompted by the distrust of Laval.

There was more shouting, more speeches, more interruptions, quite in the peacetime manner of the Palais-Bourbon. Only one speaker was notably in favour of Laval's project and the meeting had become rowdy by the time Laval decided to intervene. Still wary of mounting into the tribune, even this makeshift one on the stage, he strolled from his seat in the stalls and leaned against the footlights. Pointing his finger at Héraud, he shouted: 'You made a speech – a very fine speech. Do you think we've still time to listen to speeches? You deceive yourself; speeches are finished. We are not here to deliver them, nor you to listen to them. We are here to rebuild France. We desire to destroy everything that now exists. Then, having completed that destruction, we shall create something entirely different from what has been and what is. There are two alternatives: either you accept what we ask and come into line with the German and Italian constitutions – or Hitler will impose it on you . . .'

Rage had already led him to say more than he intended. It welled up again when he referred to his efforts as Foreign Minister, which he was convinced had been a work of inspiration thwarted by misguided and malicious men: 'By my sustained efforts I put France on the only path in which she could find salvation. I welded close relationships with Mussolini . . . I persuaded Austria to accept an understanding with the Successor States. The Austrian Chancellor came to Paris – and you know what happened. I managed to get Yugoslavia to agree with Italy. The Yugoslav Foreign Minister was to come to Paris for the final arrangements, but on the eve of his departure from Belgrade the British Ambassador there, Neville Henderson, made a *démarche* to the Yugoslav Government and all my effort was wasted . . .'

He commented on Franco-British relations: 'France has never

had, and never will have, a more rabid enemy than Great Britain. All our history is there to prove it. We have been nothing but playthings in the hands of England, who has used us to ensure her own protection. Today we are at the bottom of the abyss to which she has led us . . .’

He then attacked his most despised enemies: the theorists, the politicians with the international slogans, the *idéologues*. ‘We have just lived through years in which it mattered very little to say of a man that he was a thief, a swindler, a pimp or even a murderer. But to say “He’s a Fascist” – that was the worst label you could tie on him. We are paying today for the fetichism which chained us to democracy and delivered us to the worst excesses of capitalism, while around us Europe was forging without us a new world inspired by new principles.’

His audience realised that he was speaking with the knowledge that his words would be reported to the Germans and the Italians; but this was going too far. The uproar had died down, but there was no mistaking the hostility in the silence. He set himself to win them back again with charm and reasonableness.

‘You, Monsieur Monnet, have put a question that needed to be put, and that I was surprised not to have heard earlier. You are right. We must consider the eventuality of an accident depriving us of Marshal Pétain. We have considered this, and here is what we intend: we ask that the National Assembly shall invest Marshal Pétain with all the constitutional powers. As soon as these powers have been accorded to him, the Marshal will proceed not by laws or decrees but by “Acts”. Under the terms of the first Act he will give himself all the rights at present exercised by the President of the Republic, by Parliament, by the President of the Council and by the Ministers. Then, by a second Act, he will designate the person who, in the event of his being prevented from exercising power, will exercise it in his place.’

The Deputies could not have been told more clearly than this. Later, many of them would try to deny that they had understood the full extent of the decision that was being asked of them, but there can be no doubt that they did understand and that in taking their decision they honestly believed that it was for the good of France.

In the Senate, opposition was building up around a group of ex-soldiers under Jean Taurines. At three o'clock that afternoon, Taurines telephoned the Hôtel du Parc to ask for an interview with the Marshal. Alibert took the call and promised that he would arrange an appointment for that evening and would let Taurines know the time later. When Taurines rang again at nine p.m., Alibert was 'out' and had left no message.

With the connivance of Captain Bonhomme, Pétain's aide-de-camp, the ex-soldier Senators finally got their interview with Pétain early in the evening of the following day. They suggested to him that the constitution of 1875 need not be abolished; it would be sufficient to suspend it and vote the Marshal full powers to govern by decree until peace was signed. He could in the meantime prepare a new constitution if he wished.

'Now there's a proposal worth considering,' said the Marshal. 'Let me have it in writing.' With the air of a devoted old soldier reluctantly called to a distasteful task, he assured them that he wanted nothing better than to conclude peace and retire to the South of France. He had no ambition to be a Cæsar; all he wanted was to be spared the endless difficulties that were put in his way by Lebrun and the two Houses of Parliament. The senatorial deputation went away elated.

7 July, a Sunday, was a wearisome day for Laval. At the inner Cabinet meeting, Darlan was still clamouring for counter-attacks against the British; in the hall of the Sociétés Médicales, Taurines's group harassed him to accept their plan. Flandin, the only other former Prime Minister of any standing who was not heavily implicated in the 'guilty' pre-war Governments, had arrived in Vichy the night before and this afternoon rose at a meeting to suggest yet another way of saving the Republic: let Lebrun resign and Pétain be given the posts of both President of the Republic and President of the Council. It was agreed that Flandin should put this plan forward.

Flandin walked round to the Hôtel du Parc and expounded his plan to Laval, pointing out that with both legislative and executive powers the Marshal would be strong enough. 'That's not the Marshal's opinion,' said Laval. At Flandin's insistence, he agreed that Pétain should speak for himself, and the long, lean

Flandin climbed up the stairs from the second floor to the third.

The Marshal was as agreeable to Flandin's plan as he had been to the Senators', perhaps a little more so, since Flandin had shrewdly told him that he did not believe Laval would succeed. The Marshal repeated – the protestations were perhaps becoming a little overdone – that he did not want power for itself but merely so that he could get on with his task without interference. Flandin marched down the stairs to Laval's room again, to tell him that he was quite wrongly informed about the Marshal's attitude. 'Very well,' said Laval, 'I will support your plan if you can get Lebrun's resignation.'

Flandin, observing protocol by putting on his white gloves and taking two fellow-Deputies with him, then paid a call on Lebrun at the Pavillon Sévigné, and asked him to resign. Lebrun was horrified: 'I see no reason at all why I should offer my resignation,' he protested. 'The situation is quite clear. The Chambers are presented with a proposal by the Government. This proposal does not please them. They reject it. I constitute a new Government. It is perfectly simple.' He added that he had no right to resign without the agreement of the Presidents of the Senate and the Chamber; but under pressure he agreed to ask their advice.

While Flandin was seeing Lebrun, Taurines had again been smuggled into the Hôtel du Parc by Captain Bonhomme, with the draft proposal which Pétain had asked him to put into writing. 'I accept it,' said Pétain, 'but you must first of all convince Monsieur Laval, who is the Government spokesman in this affair, as you know.' So down the stairs went Taurines to see Laval, who by this time was thoroughly tired of disillusioning the Marshal's satisfied clients. 'I don't accept your text,' he told him sharply.

When Taurines persisted, Laval threatened to resign and leave them to the dictatorship of Weygand. Taurines answered that Laval had already threatened them with the Germans. Now it was Weygand. Who would it be next? The ex-soldiers who had saved France in 1914–18 would save her again by bringing forward their project in the Senate. Laval said, very well, he would answer them in the Senate.

As soon as he had got rid of Taurines, Laval went up to the Marshal's room to remonstrate with the old man. When he returned, he had the Marshal's specific support for his plan, in writing. Despite constant warnings from his wife that Pétain was ruthless and untrustworthy, Laval seems to have continued to believe for a long time that the simple old soldier's deviousness was due more to senility than to slyness. 'He agrees with everybody,' he had told Flandin that afternoon. 'You can't rely on it because he forgets immediately afterwards.'

On Monday evening Flandin called on Lebrun to ask him for his decision. Lebrun told him that neither Herriot, President of the Chamber, nor Jeanneney, President of the Senate, had been in favour; though that, no doubt, was because Lebrun had not expounded the idea well. Perhaps Flandin would run over it again for him? Flandin did so.

He knew that he was wasting his time. During the afternoon Laval had presented to the Council of Ministers the preliminary motion which each Chamber would have to pass in order to call the National Assembly: 'The Chamber declares that there is reason to revise the constitutional laws.' The order placing this motion before the Chamber and the Senate had been signed by Lebrun without protest or comment.

For Laval there had been one particularly bright spot in the afternoon: a right-wing journalist named Jean Fontenoy had arrived from Paris with a message saying that Otto Abetz would be interested in talking with Laval. Laval had never met Abetz – who had spent several years in Paris, had been expelled by Daladier in July 1939 for gross Nazi propaganda, and was now back as representative of the German Foreign Ministry with the High Command – but he realised that here was an opportunity to open negotiations with a civilian instead of the bemedalled squareheads on the German Armistice Commission.

The two Houses met on Tuesday, the Deputies in the morning, the Senators in the afternoon. Both meetings were held in the theatre of the Grand Casino, a green-cloth-covered table on the stage to serve as a tribune and ladders at each side up which the Members clambered to speak. There were 398 Deputies, 230 Senators, each issued with his white and blue voting tickets as he

entered the auditorium. Members of the public were admitted to the boxes and balconies.

The motion to call the National Assembly was accepted without difficulty. Both Herriot and Jeanneney paid tribute to the Marshal and, by implication, to the motion. It was passed in the Chamber by 395 votes to 3; in the Senate by 229 votes to 1, that of the Marquis de Chambrun, another of René's uncles.

The following day, 10 July 1940, in the Grand Casino at Vichy, the Third Republic died after an existence of not quite sixty-five years. Vincent Auriol has described Laval as the only completely unperturbed and self-possessed man in the place that day, dominating the situation and pulling every string:

'An eternal cigarette in his mouth, like Briand, and, like him, slightly bent, a set walk, his head sunk in his shoulders and leaning forward . . . He sees a group of Members and goes up to them. He halts beside a colleague and pretends to listen to him: in fact, with his sidelong glance, he is surveying "his world". Of his narrowed Mongol eyes, imprisoned in the folds of his heavy eyelids, there was nothing to be seen but a black spot.'

Laval climbed the steps on to the stage and for a moment seemed to lose his confidence in the bare proscenium, baffled by this loss of contact with those beyond the footlights. He hesitated a moment, then took a chair and sat down. 'I will remain seated,' he said. 'The debate will have more of a family character and will encourage fewer interruptions.'

It was considerable impertinence, even from the Vice-President of the Council and in these irregular times. Its success immediately restored his confidence and he drew from his pocket his trump-card: the paper that he had got the Marshal to sign after Taurines's visit three days before.

'To avoid any misunderstanding I want to give these observations the Marshal's authority by reading you the letter which he gave me on 7 July 1940: "The projected constitutional law submitted by the Government over which I preside will be debated on Tuesday and Wednesday, 9 and 10 July, before the Assembly. As it is difficult for me to take part in the sitting, I ask you to represent me there. A vote in favour of the project which the Government is submitting to the National Assembly

appears to me to be necessary to ensure the welfare of our country.”’

With the reading of the letter Laval had virtually won, for there were few present who were not willing to bow before the Marshal's wisdom. But now that he was on the stage, Laval realised that he could not get off without a speech, a strangely incongruous speech, most of it delivered in conversational tones, covering all the points that he had been making during the past week.

‘The greatest crime that has been committed in our country for a long time is certainly that of having declared war, and of having declared war without having prepared for it, either militarily or diplomatically . . .

‘I will speak to you, as I ought, with great frankness. We have not neglected a single fault; we have committed them all. It seemed as if an evil destiny dogged us.

‘Remember the wireless broadcasts. Remember the Press campaigns since the war. Listen to their voices. It was the war of Democracy against the Dictators. We must strike down Nazism and Fascism. In the evenings in my village in the Auvergne, when I turned the switch of my radio, I was horrified to hear that it was always democracy that was spoken about – and rarely France . . .

‘It has been said – it was the argument of those who wanted to leave – that France did not want to admit that she was conquered. If there had been the slightest glimmer of hope, what Frenchman would have thought otherwise? But you know well – all of you – from Clermont-Ferrand to Bordeaux, in the saddest journey I ever made, I witnessed the spectacle of a routed army. Not because our greatest generals have said it, but because you have seen this spectacle for yourselves, you know that we could not fight on . . .

‘Leave? That would have doomed what was left of France to total invasion. You don't save France by quitting its soil, I said. And I still say it . . .

‘I affirm that we have no intention of declaring war on England, but each time that we can we shall return blow for blow . . . First England dragged us into the war; then she did nothing to allow us to achieve victory . . . Then there came the

ultimatum at Mers-el-Kebir . . . We have answered force with force, to save the honour of our navy and our flag. But this was no fair fight that His Majesty's navy engaged in: it was an assassination . . .'

He told how he had tried to get the Government to send a consul-general to Franco, as the British had done. Georges Bonnet, then Foreign Minister, had said he must consult the Prime Minister, Daladier, about it:

'I found Monsieur Daladier in the committee room. I said the same things to him. Here is what his reply was: "You are right," he told me, "but if I did what you ask I should lose eighty votes in the Chamber. . . ."

'We have the good fortune and the happiness to have in France, despite the misery in which we live, a victorious soldier, a Marshal of France. The entire universe respects this man who incarnates the most beautiful page of our history. We are fortunate to have him, to be able to shelter behind him, in our attempts to assure the welfare of our country. That is what I invite you to do, and I am sure there will be no lack of support for the acceptance of the measure, because it is to France that you will be giving it.'

The morning session had been secret. The public was admitted to the afternoon session, which went off almost without incident. There was a discussion about the method of calculating the majority: whether by the total number of Members on the parliamentary lists (which would have required 476 votes to provide a majority) or by the number of members actually present. The second, and smaller, figure was agreed upon, though in fact the majority was achieved by either method of reckoning.

At the moment of voting Vincent Badie, leader of the group that wished to preserve the Republic, stood up to speak and was shouted down. He clambered on to the stage and other Members held him back. Jeanneney, President of the Senate and therefore President of the National Assembly, pretended not to see or hear anything out of the ordinary and proceeded with the vote. The motion was passed by 569 for, with 80 against and 17 abstentions.

Laval returned to the Hôtel du Parc and found Pétain greatly

impressed by this triumph and the others somewhat depressed that it should be Laval who had achieved it. When the meeting broke up, Laval strolled over to Pétain and asked: 'Well, are you satisfied with what I have obtained for you, Marshal?'

'Perfect,' replied Pétain. 'And now, Monsieur Laval, you shall learn how to obey.' Laval thought it a great joke.

[4]

THE EAGER ALIBERT had the first three constitutional acts already prepared. By the first act, the Marshal assumed the functions of 'Head of the French State'. By the second he allotted himself all powers with the exception of the declaration of war, which had to have the previous assent of the Assembly. By the third he suspended both Chamber and Senate.

Laval noted with cynical amusement but no particular concern the gusto with which the old gentleman read the regal preamble: 'We, Philippe Pétain . . .' To Laval, Pétain was a perfect figure-head, even though an old fool.

Two days after the Assembly's vote, Pétain called his Ministers into the small salon next to his study and asked for their collective resignation. When the paper had been passed round and signed, he said: 'You have learned from my broadcast yesterday evening that my new Government will have only twelve Ministers, which means that at least six of you who are Ministers will have to go. I thank you all for your loyal co-operation. You will learn tomorrow from the *Journal Officiel* who are to be the members of my new Cabinet. I thank you.'

Pétain wanted a smaller Cabinet partly because he was a little deaf and had difficulty in hearing when more than one person spoke at a time, but principally because he intended to form the Government on military lines. 'I must give my orders to three men, who will command fifteen, who will command a hundred, and so on . . .' For the moment he satisfied himself with an inner Cabinet of six: Laval, Alibert, Baudouin, Bouthillier, Darlan and Weygand.

Laval had been fiercely scheming for several days, against the united opposition of the others, to be appointed the Marshal's successor; but his principal enemy, Baudouin, was convinced that he had persuaded the Marshal against this. Immediately after the collective resignation on 12 July, Baudouin again spoke to the Marshal and was assured that Pétain did not intend to name anybody but would leave the choice to the Cabinet. Baudouin left the room for a few minutes and, on returning, found Laval with the Marshal. Pétain told Baudouin that he had decided to nominate Laval. Baudouin turned and asked Laval in an angry whisper how he had managed it. 'Oh,' said Laval, 'I just asked quite firmly, and that was enough.'

Ten days later the *Journal Officiel* published Constitutional Act No. 4: 'If, before the ratification of the new constitution, we are prevented by any cause whatsoever from exercising the functions of Head of State, M. Pierre Laval, Vice-President of the Council, will assume them with full rights.' Weygand remarked bitterly: 'I never expected that the marriage of a Marshal of France with the Republic would have produced Pierre Laval as its progeny.'

Across the Channel another candidate was making his plans. The struggle between France's self-appointed and ill-assorted Messiahs – de Gaulle, Pétain and Laval – was to bring her great grief and their allies much confusion. It was fought out mainly in terms of de Gaulle versus Pétain, but it was Laval who paid in the end.

Pétain's military career was for the most part slow and undistinguished and he showed no great interest in politics until he was over seventy. De Gaulle, a brave and brilliant soldier, was a 'political general' long before he was a general at all. Each at the moment of defeat saw himself not only as the Saviour of France but also as the Ruler of France. If de Gaulle was the more active and aggressive in his attempts to wrest the title from Pétain, the Marshal was no less dogged and wily in his determination not to surrender it.

For the first two years of their battle Pétain had one overwhelming advantage. However much de Gaulle might try to dispute it, the Marshal was the constitutionally appointed Head of

the State and Government of France and was recognised as such not only by the neutral countries headed by Russia and America but also by Canada and South Africa. But for the rupture of diplomatic relations after Mers-el-Kebir, Britain herself would no doubt have retained a representative at Vichy, if only for the sake of obtaining information.

While high-sounding volleys of *la gloire, l'honneur* and *la patrie* were exchanged between Pétain and de Gaulle, Laval pursued his unglamorous and often inglorious attempts to come to terms with the Germans. He was no less inspired by conceit and pride than the other two, but his pride was in the thought that he could spare France as much misery as possible and build up her material strength once more, and his conceit in the belief that he was the only man who could achieve this.

Laval's love of his country was deep and passionate in its way: 'I cannot live if I cannot tread the soil, the furrows, talk with peasants, the people of my home.' As for honour and glory, he would leave the others to argue about that. 'What is so discouraging in Monsieur Laval,' Pétain said, 'is his lack of appreciation of spiritual values.'

Laval had as yet no certainty that the Germans would accept him as a negotiator. As Foreign Minister he had consistently tried to lure Italy away from them and thus complete the ring of steel in which he hoped to encircle them; he had attacked the Munich agreement; they could scarcely regard him as favourably inclined to them. Having heard no more from Fontenoy, he sent two of his shadier acquaintances, de Brinon and Luchaire, to see if they could arrange a meeting with Abetz. Both were journalists, both pro-Nazis, both married to Jewesses. De Brinon was the man through whom Daladier had made approaches to Hitler in 1933. Luchaire, one of whose daughters was an opera dancer and the other a film star, had known Abetz since the 'thirties and his former secretary was now Abetz's wife.

The Germans had clamped a tight control on the line of demarkation that cut France in two. 'This line is a bit that we've put in the horse's mouth,' said General von Stülpnagel, head of the German Armistice Commission. 'If France rears, we will tighten the curb, and we will slacken it as France becomes amenable.'

Laval realised – as indeed did everybody else – that unless there could be communication across this line, France would become involved in desperate economic difficulties and Germany would be free to proceed with the total Nazification of the occupied zone. He became more and more infuriated with the *attentistes* in the Cabinet. These, led by Baudouin and Weygand, insisted that the only proper policy was to abide strictly by the terms of the armistice, have no other dealings with their conquerors, and wait for the peace settlement which would come as soon as Germany had defeated Britain.

This was precisely where Laval's fears lay. It was possible that the British might agree to a compromise peace. It was possible that Hitler might successfully invade Britain, but the Commonwealth would still remain. In either case, the British Government would be in a position to negotiate and, Laval predicted, 'peace will be made on France's back'.

On 16 July a bombshell arrived in Vichy: a note from the Armistice Commission in Wiesbaden announcing that Hitler required the use of eight airfields in Morocco, the railway that ran the length of North Africa from Tunis to Rabat, French ports on the Mediterranean and the Atlantic coast of Africa, and French merchant vessels to transport German units to North Africa. It meant, in fact, the virtual German occupation of French North Africa. The Marshal consulted with Laval, Weygand and Baudouin and all agreed that the request must be refused.

The next two days, while Pétain's reply was being drawn up, were filled with gloomy anticipations of what Hitler's reactions would be, but Laval was cheered by a message from Paris that Abetz would see him on the 19th. At Moulins, on the frontier of the occupied zone, he was met by de Brinon and a captain of the Wehrmacht, for not even the Vice-President of the Council could cross the line without permission. It was three weeks since he had last seen German military police directing the traffic, and twice as long since he had last seen Paris. He drove straight to his house in the Villa Saïd and from there went on to keep his appointment at 4 p.m. with Abetz at the German Embassy in the Rue de Lille. He had missed the regular midday humiliation of the parade down the Champs-Élysées of the Germans, slapping

down their feet to the ear-splitting din of fifes and drums. But the Place de la Concorde was hung with Nazi flags and there were field-grey uniforms everywhere among the crowds.

His conversation with Abetz opened cautiously, each sounding the other out. In Abetz, fair-haired and watery-blue-eyed, the German craving to be loved exceeded but did not extinguish the German lust to dominate. He had been born in Karlsruhe, close to the German-French border, and as a young man had been active in German-French youth movements. He had earned his living as a drawing-master in Germany and in France and, when the Nazis showed signs of gaining power, he joined the Party, out of self-interest rather than political conviction. By hard work and pushfulness he got himself accepted in the German Foreign Office as some sort of expert on French affairs. Now, at thirty-six, he saw a great career ahead of him if he could by-pass the German occupation authorities and deal directly with the Vichy Government.

This was precisely what Laval wanted, but Abetz was not yet sure that Laval was a safe man for him to talk with. It had taken him a week to get permission from Berlin for Laval to come to Paris, and Laval's request that he should make his headquarters at the Quai d'Orsay and fly the French flag there had been turned down flat. It was evident that Berlin had no great faith in Laval; on the other hand, nobody else at Vichy had shown any interest in talking with a mere counsellor-general attached to military headquarters.

Laval often remarked that it was a mistake to brush the Germans up the wrong way by giving them a direct refusal, but it was fatal to accept their demands without argument, as the *attentistes* at Vichy wished to do, within the framework of the armistice. His success as a negotiator arose from his apparent frankness. He accepted the justice of the German claims; then blocked them by arguing that it would not be in Germany's ultimate interest for France to comply fully with them.

The argument that he put to Abetz at their first meeting, and which he repeated to every other German throughout the occupation, was simple and blunt: 'Germany can make France suffer great hardships, but she cannot annihilate her. Every

injury will one day recoil on Germany herself. Neither Germany nor France yet fully understands the importance of this historic moment. Is it really in Germany's interest to reject reconciliation when we offer to work with her for the benefit of Europe?' However weak his position, he always argued as if he were not asking for favours but conferring benefits.

Before he left, he offered Abetz some words of encouragement. 'One can't talk with all your uniforms, Monsieur Abetz,' he said, 'but you are intelligent and don't wish my country any harm: one can talk with you, I'm sure. But you really ought to have a title, an official position and responsibilities.' Abetz could not have been more in agreement; he sent an enthusiastic account of the conversations to Berlin and was ordered to return there to report in person.

[5]

LAVAL LEFT PARIS on Sunday afternoon and arrived in Vichy at half-past eight that evening. Before setting off for Chateldon he saw Bouthillier and gleefully showed him the permanent pass that Abetz had got for him. Bouthillier regarded it with alarm, and was even more worried by Laval's increased confidence: 'He had become more brusque and distant with his colleagues, more secret and evasive, as if his inner universe was henceforward filled with revelations, unforeseen perspectives and new ideas whose realisation would make the future of France and his own. . . . Franco-German policy was to be his personal domain and I realised that he would not be accountable for it to anybody, not even the Marshal.'

Bouthillier himself was off to Paris the following morning, to try to arrange for his Ministry of Finance to move there. He avoided attending the meeting of the inner Cabinet, for fear that Laval might try to prevent his leaving, but slipped into Baudouin's office to warn him of the Vice-President's alarming complacency.

The icy reception that Laval encountered did not depress him. The Marshal had a cold; Weygand was furious that any approaches should be made to the Germans outside official military channels; Baudouin was livid at Laval's having gone over his head and taken the initiative in foreign affairs. Baudouin found Laval's account of the conversations 'hazy and disordered' (a fair description of most of Laval's reports). He formed the mistaken impression that Laval had had to wait several hours to see Abetz and indignantly demanded whether it was fitting for the Vice-President of the Council even to take the trouble to make a journey to see such an insignificant person as Abetz.

'If it had been necessary, I would have waited for Abetz all night in the gutter,' Laval snapped back. He was almost immediately involved in a squabble with Weygand, who said he wholeheartedly hoped that Germany would be defeated. Laval replied that, on the contrary, only the complete victory of Germany would permit Europe to be built on a solid foundation. His natural tendency to say anything that would annoy Weygand was reinforced by his annoyance at having learned that Weygand was having his telephone tapped. He made the discovery when a complete record of his conversations was sent up to his office in error by one of Weygand's clumsy underlings.

A few days later one of his friends warned him that the Marshal's right-wing clique were plotting to get rid of him. 'They wouldn't dare!' he said. But his confidence flagged during the next fortnight. There was no indication of when Abetz would return from Berlin; the pressure on France from both Germany and Britain increased; and the Marshal and his satellites seemed interested in nothing but planning their 'National Revolution'.

Baudouin continued to try to convince the Marshal that Laval's policy was wrong and that they must stick strictly to the terms of the armistice. 'The Germans will send a division to Vichy and the Government will be made prisoner. So much the better . . . We shall be prisoners; but for how long? I do not know, but on the day that France regains her freedom, she will find in the prisoners a Government ready to lead her, and one which will have the halo of suffering.'

The Marshal made no reply. At his age he was not prepared to gamble on future haloes. He wanted his glory now.

Cabinet meetings took on an air of tatty ineffectuality. Wildly irrelevant minor decisions were taken while the general situation daily worsened. Weygand reported that von Stülpnagel had again said that the French had better recognise that they had been conquered and do as they were told; Alibert persuaded the Marshal to deprive all émigrés of their nationality and property; the German military commander refused to have Bouthilliers' Ministry, or any others, in Paris; the Marshal decided to send Gamelin, Georges, Reynaud, Daladier, Blum and others for trial before the High Court on charges of having precipitated, failed to prepare for, and wrongly conducted the war; the British landed troops at Duala in the French Cameroons and sent an ultimatum to the Governor of Madagascar.

On 31 July Britain declared that her blockade of Germany would include the whole of France and French North Africa. France thus lost one of her principal sources of grain and vegetable oils. Baudouin appealed to the British Foreign Minister, Lord Halifax, to accept a system of navicerts, sending his telegram via Washington, where Roosevelt himself was perturbed at the possible effect of the blockade on American public opinion; but the British Government replied that it had no proof that food and other materials sent to the unoccupied zone would not fall into German hands.

The weather outside turned wet and miserable and the storms in the Cabinet continued: quarrels between Laval and Weygand; criticisms of the few remaining parliamentary Ministers by the Marshal; arguments by Darlan in favour of naval action against the British; and Laval's constant urging that nothing should be done until Abetz's return. Britain had rejected Hitler's peace offer; the attitude of the German Armistice Commission had become more threatening; it was possible that Hitler might invade the whole of unoccupied France and French North Africa in order to get more bases on the Mediterranean and the Atlantic coast of Morocco.

On 5 August Laval received an invitation for a meeting the following day with Abetz, whose wildest dreams had just been

fulfilled with his appointment as German Ambassador. Laval waited in Paris for two days before Abetz arrived, while the Marshal fretted at not having a telephone call from him. On 10 August Laval was back again, with empty hands. Abetz had seemed cold and was evidently unable to negotiate any concessions until after the Battle of Britain was over. The first phase, to clear the Channel and coastal areas, was about to give way to the main attack on the fighter bases in southern England.

Though Baudouin, Bouthillier and the others talked largely of their determination to adhere strictly to the armistice terms and to accept the consequences of a flat refusal when the Germans asked too much, they never managed to agree that the instant of martyrdom had come. The Germans claimed cattle from the unoccupied zone to be sent to the occupied zone. They forced Baudouin to break off relations with the Governments of all the countries they had occupied. They annexed Alsace-Lorraine; they cut off the northern sector of the occupied zone and administered it from Brussels; they began to instal German farmers in the Ardennes.

Laval fretted more and more at this *attentiste* drifting with the tide. The German air force had proclaimed that it was destroying British planes in the proportion of two to one. (The R.A.F. was claiming that the figures were three to one in its own favour, but most of the world, including the United States, believed the German estimate. In fact, the figures were two to one in favour of the R.A.F., the opposite of Göring's claim.) In the way that things were going, Germany would not only have begun to make peace with Britain before France could negotiate with her but France would have lost much of what she still owned.

He went to Paris again on 20 August and, since the German Foreign Office was apparently powerless as long as the Battle of Britain continued, he persuaded Abetz to take him to see one of the squareheads whom he hated so much: Field-Marshal von Brauchitsch. He knew that the Germans were disturbed by the activities of British agents in North Africa and the Gaullists in West and Equatorial Africa and were still contemplating occupying Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco. He suggested to Brauchitsch that the French army should be provided with the

necessary arms and training cadres (to be drawn from the French prisoners in Germany) so that they might defend their own possessions. Brauchitsch politely implied that this odd-looking civilian should mind his own business.

In Vichy the Marshal was occupied with a new scheme of his own. Like the others, he had been perturbed by Laval's visits to Paris and by the fact that he was the only member of the Government who had made close – though so far unfruitful – contact with the Germans. Pétain suspected that his own position might be threatened. He decided to consolidate it by making an approach to Hitler over Laval's head.

The problem was how to do this in secret, since such a move would be violently opposed – though for very different reasons – by both Laval and the *attentistes*. The Marshal recalled that one of his old acquaintances, Colonel Fonck, a French air ace of the 1914–18 war, was also acquainted with another air ace of the same war: Hermann Göring. Vice-Admiral Fernet, Pétain's secretary in his capacity as President of the Council, brought Fonck to the Marshal's room for a quiet talk. It was agreed that Fonck should make preparations to get in touch with Göring. When the time was ripe, Fernet would give him the signal to tell Göring that Pétain wished to talk with Hitler.

Early in September Pétain told Baudouin and Bouthillier that he had decided to get rid of the remaining ex-parliamentarians in the Government. He would retain Laval, but would not let him have any post in addition to his Vice-Presidency. Though he did not tell them so, this move also gave him the opportunity to get rid of Weygand.

The bad feeling between Weygand and Pétain had deep roots. Weygand had been the right-hand man of Pétain's successful rival, Foch. His active service record was longer and more distinguished than the Marshal's. His excitable, forthright nature had prevented him at times from concealing his contempt for the Marshal's talent for double-dealing. 'We kept him in the path of honour by kicking his behind,' he said bitterly when Pétain was given his Marshal's baton.

Pétain told Baudouin and Bouthillier that he would be forced to get rid of Weygand so that people would not have the

impression that all the parliamentarians were being dismissed and all the military men retained. He would abolish Weygand's Ministry of National Defence and split it into separate Ministries of War, Navy and Air under General Huntziger, Admiral Darlan and General Bergeret, a rather odd way of decreasing the number of military men in the Government. At the request of Baudouin and Bouthillier, Pétain agreed to find Weygand another job: as the Government's delegate in North Africa, a safe posting because he had secretly arranged for Darlan to take over there in an emergency.

On 5 September, the new Council of Ministers held its first meeting in the garden of the Pavillon Sévigné. (Like an actor playing two parts before different backdrops, the Marshal shuttled backwards and forward between the Pavillon Sévigné, where he held Councils of Ministers as Head of State, and the Hôtel du Parc where he held Cabinet meetings as Head of the Government.) At Darlan's suggestion, yet another military man had been found a place in the Government: Admiral Platon, a wild reactionary who had distinguished himself at Dunkirk and was now appointed Minister for Colonies, with headquarters, most inappropriately, at the Hôtel Britannique. Platon was the first of many admirals whom Darlan manoeuvred into the administration or into governorships overseas. His success was so great that one French cardinal was quoted as saying: 'When I die, I really don't know where they'll manage to find an admiral to replace me.'

Laval had made no great efforts to save his fellow-parliamentarians, with the exception of Marquet, who had been replaced at the Ministry of the Interior by Marcel Peyrouton. Marquet himself certainly felt that Laval's efforts were not vigorous enough and, seeing him enter the Restaurant Ricou for lunch the following day, he rushed up to him, shouting: 'You're the biggest stinker of the lot! Stinker! D'you hear?'

'Shut up! You're a——!' said Laval. 'You didn't have to let them do it to you. I wouldn't have given my signature.'

'Don't be so clever,' Marquet interrupted. 'Watch out! The same thing could happen to you, and serve you right.'

Laval continued unperturbed to the lunch table, where it was

his habit to forget his worries and the diet that his wife tried to enforce when he was at home. Surrounded by his cronies, he would eat a rusk and drink a plate of soup, and then say: 'Well, that was my diet. I'm a bit peckish today; let's get on with the menu.'

His staff exercised themselves in finding new dishes and new restaurants for him, though not always making sufficient allowance for his peasant carefulness, which often appeared at the most unexpected times. One of them, having discovered a good restaurant some distance outside Vichy, telephoned to book a table for the Vice-President. When Laval came out of the Hôtel du Parc at one o'clock, got into his car and was told his destination, he flew into a fit of rage. 'You're mad!' he shouted. 'Do you think I'm going to waste Government petrol on going all that way to lunch?'

On another occasion somebody had killed a pig and invited Laval to a lunch made up entirely of pork dishes calculated to play havoc with the Vice-President's liver and set him fishing out the box of stomach-powder that he always carried with him. Laval delightedly munched his way through roast pork, pig's head, black pudding, *andouillette*. 'Ah, *andouillette*,' he said with a grin. '*Andouillette* is just like a government: you need a spot of dung in it – but not too much.'

[6]

ON THE NIGHT that Pétain formed his new Government, Göring added the systematic bombing of London to his daylight attacks on the airfields. For nine weeks an average of two hundred bombers every night dropped their whistling loads of explosives on the city and its suburbs, and each morning a sprinkling of proud, pitiful twopenny Union Jacks on thin slivers of wood sprang up on the rubble beneath which lay the dead and dying, like garish wayside flowers in the furrows that the Luftwaffe had ploughed. The German wireless announced that the resistance of the R.A.F. was weakening. From Switzerland and from the

American Embassy, Vichy had confirmation of the violence of the attack on London and British anxieties about the shortage of fighter planes. There was nobody to tell them that this quantitative analysis meant little compared with the mystic alchemy by which Churchill's words were transformed into a massive accession of sheer physical courage among his countrymen.

Many of the Vichy *attentistes* began to adjust their positions. With Germany about to triumph, two things were necessary: to get rid of Laval and to take his place in making contact with the Germans. Without the unyielding pride of Weygand to stiffen them they followed the Marshal (though they did not know this) in throwing overboard the policy of rigid and aloof adherence to the armistice terms.

On 12 September, Baudouin was delighted to hear that the once-despised Abetz was prepared to receive him. He hurried off to Paris, where he assured Abetz that he was just as eager as Laval to see France defend her colonies by force. (The Cameroons, French Equatorial Africa and the Tchad had all declared for de Gaulle at the end of August.)

On Sunday, 15 September, Pétain told Fernet to send the agreed signal to Fonck: 'I beg you to give me news of your relations in the Vosges.' The plan very nearly went astray. Fonck did not manage to see Göring until early October and was then told that Göring did not concern himself with political matters and was sending the Marshal's inquiry on to Abetz. Abetz was shrewd enough not to say anything to Laval and immediately forwarded the message to Berlin.

That Sunday was the climax of the Battle of Britain. All day long, under the hot September sun, the Hurricanes and Spitfires roared from the crater-pitted runways into the clear upper sky, racing like gigantic insects to their heroic, deadly nuptial encounters. By nightfall the German hope of an invasion of England that year was ended. Two days later Hitler decided to postpone 'Operation Sea-Lion' indefinitely.

The Marshal studied his maps every morning and soon arrived at a shrewd appreciation of the position. He was therefore delighted to be presented, on 20 September, with an opportunity to hedge his bet. Baudouin brought to his office Louis Rougier, a

Professor of Political Economy, who had since August been renewing his contacts with friends in England through whom he hoped to get an interview with a member of the British Government and plead for a relaxation of the blockade. Rougier had now arranged this and wished to have the Marshal's blessing on his trip.

Pétain was very pleased to give it. He was not quite so ready to put it in writing and contented himself with scribbling on a visiting card a note bringing the Professor to 'the kindly attention of our diplomatic and consular representatives'. In speech he was more forthcoming: 'Monsieur Laval is the man whom I most despise in the whole world, but I still have need of him. Later, I shall get rid of him. You can tell the English that.' Rougier was smuggled out as he had been smuggled in.

Meanwhile, the Government had been confronted with the first of the many impossible situations which were to arise from its pseudo-independence in a country that was three-fifths occupied by the Germans and threatened with complete occupation at any moment. Vichy was in principle the Government of the whole of France, but in the occupied zone the Germans could suspend Vichy laws or introduce laws of their own on the excuse of military necessity. As the Germans pressed for sterner action in 'ideological' spheres, Vichy gradually developed its disastrous policy of enacting mild laws in order to dissuade the Germans from imposing harsher ones.

On 10 September General de la Laurencie, the Vichy Delegate-General at German headquarters, reported that the Germans were about to introduce anti-Jewish ordinances. To some members of the Vichy Government this was not entirely unwelcome. Intolerance was implicit in the 'National Revolution' that they dreamed of. The Marshal had already taken the first step towards single-party Government by disbanding all ex-soldier organisations in favour of the *Légion Française des Combattants*, from which the Militia was to develop and in which all members were bound to him by an oath of allegiance. At the end of August all secret societies had been abolished: a blow aimed principally at the Freemasons, who were forbidden to hold official posts and were denounced by name in the *Journal Officiel*.

Laval was violently opposed to racial persecution, and made this clear at the Council of Ministers at which Laurencie's report was discussed. His personal staff in the past had included many Jews. He had already had one brush with the extremists in Pétain's entourage in July, when the editor of *Paris-Soir*, then being published at Clermont-Ferrand, sent him a message to say that the paper was carrying an anti-Semitic editorial; he had just discovered that it was in the paper and that it had been printed on the orders of a member of the Marshal's secretariat.

Laval telephoned the editor and had the editorial read over to him. At the end, he said: 'I assume you have already thrown it out. It is absolutely impossible to publish it. . . . Marshal or no Marshal, I don't give a bugger. They can't count on me for their anti-Semitism.'

The envy and insecurity that are the basis of racial prejudice had no part at all in Laval's over-confident character, and he despised it in others. When told that the Jews had obtained a stranglehold on the means of propaganda, on the cinema and Press, and occupied a greatly disproportionate number of places in the legal and medical professions, he would put on his sly peasant grin and reply: 'Not where I come from. Ninety-nine per cent of the lawyers are Auvergnats; ninety-nine per cent of the doctors are Auvergnats. A Jew can't feed off an Auvergnat.'

That he agreed with the Cabinet's decision to fob the Germans off with half-measures (the first was published on 18 October, forbidding Jews to hold public office) was in line with his general policy: give them the minimum and so prevent them from taking the maximum. But it was on this sort of moral problem that his purely materialist policy could not be justified. The 'damned ideologies' were tripping him up again: German ideologies, applied by French compromise.

It was not only from the Germans that Vichy's headaches came. For de Gaulle and the British now renewed operations. On 8 September the Spanish Ambassador in Vichy told Baudouin that the Duke of Alba, the Spanish Ambassador in London, had reported that de Gaulle had left the country and was thought to be headed for North Africa.

De Gaulle was in fact making for West Africa, with a large

British naval force, two battalions of Free French soldiers, and a battalion of British marines. De Gaulle, who had earlier agreed with Churchill that Free French soldiers should never be called upon to fight other Frenchmen, had convinced the British Government that Vichy had allowed the Germans to penetrate into French West Africa and that the local population was waiting with open arms to receive him (on both of which points he was entirely wrong).

The expedition was due to assemble at Freetown before making a swoop on Dakar and demanding the town's allegiance to the Gaullist cause. While it was still at sea, news arrived at the Admiralty that six French cruisers had passed through the Straits of Gibraltar and headed southward. Ships from Gibraltar and the Dakar expedition were ordered to intercept them and turn them back to Casablanca. They failed to make contact and the six cruisers dropped anchor at Dakar.

Churchill sent orders on 16 September that the Dakar venture should be called off 'unless General de Gaulle has any strong objections' and the Free French troops should be landed at Duala to help consolidate the position in the Cameroons. But de Gaulle did have strong objections; he insisted that there was 'substantial support' for him in Dakar and that it would be possible to enter the harbour unopposed.

The operation was a dire failure. De Gaulle's emissaries landed by plane just outside the town and were made prisoner. More emissaries, arriving by launch, were fired on and the coastal batteries opened up. The British fleet approached through a thick and unexpected fog and opened fire at a range of 5,000 yards. At this relatively close distance the ships were too vulnerable to the shore batteries and after ninety minutes' bombardment they retired. An attempt to land de Gaulle's troops farther along the coast at Rufisque was hampered by fog and opposed by the Vichy troops and the action was called off until the following day.

The news of the attack arrived at Vichy in the mid-afternoon. Darlan and Baudouin fetched Laval and the three of them went up to the Marshal's room, where they were joined by the two other service Ministers, Huntziger and Bergeret, and by Admiral

Platon. Darlan was demented with rage and the others were appalled at the probable German reaction. The defection of French Equatorial Africa had provided the British with a safe overland route for their aircraft from the Atlantic coast to the Sudan. The loss of French West Africa would be much more serious, since it bordered Algeria in the north. Squadrons of aircraft were ordered to leave Morocco for Dakar and there was no further opposition to Darlan's plea that Gibraltar should be bombed. It was agreed that Laval should go to Paris the following day with Huntziger to ask the Germans to relax the military restrictions so that France could build up a force to defend her colonies.

While Laval travelled up to Paris, French aircraft from Morocco dropped 150 bombs on the harbour and docks of Gibraltar, and the British fleet at Dakar, in better visibility, was able to stand off farther from the coast and shell the town from a range of 13,000 yards. On the following day the bombing and shelling continued, the French planes dropping twice as heavy a load on Gibraltar and the British finally calling off the attack on Dakar in the afternoon, since it was evident that the town would put up a stubborn resistance and possible that continued fighting might force Vichy to declare war.

This deadly fiasco, which had again almost precipitated war between the two allies of four months before, brought deep depression to Britain, alarm to the Commonwealth, and a wave of adverse criticism in America, where Roosevelt's distrust of de Gaulle grew deeper than ever.

[7]

NEITHER LAVAL NOR Huntziger made any progress with the Germans in Paris, who were satisfied with the resistance that the French had offered at Dakar but were still without any directives from Berlin. Laval telephoned Vichy, but only to inquire about one of his dogs which was seriously ill. The future of France still bubbled secretly in Hitler's overheated mind. In Vichy the

Marshal occupied himself with Alibert's plans for saving the soul of France by decree: the suppression of spirit-drinking; the encouragement of sport; the establishment of youth camps; the strengthening of paternal rights; the discouragement of divorce.

The Marshal was a healthy old man who liked to take a two-mile walk before lunch, at which he ate well and drank a little red wine. He was fond of children, having none himself, and when he met them in the park would hold his stick in his two hands, horizontally, and encourage them to swing on it. It was believed in Vichy that Bernard Ménétré, his young doctor, owed much of his power over the Marshal to the fact that he had two little girls, aged four and five, and these, when the Marshal proved obstinate, were not allowed to play with him.

He had been a very handsome man and had had great success with the ladies. 'I have had two passions: love and the infantry,' he said. His marriage (to a divorcée) twenty years before he considered to have been rather precipitate. At eighty-four he confessed that he would be completely happy if only he could make love several times a week, adding cheerfully that he still had his moments of inspiration.

Baudouin, Bouthillier and the others had urged him to publicise himself more, hoping that this might build up his resistance to Laval. On 14 October he made a fifty-mile trip to Ambert, where he was given a royal reception by the mayor, cheered by the populace, offered gifts in the old feudal style, and surrounded by children and pretty young women. He was delighted with the experience and was soon making personal appearances all over the unoccupied zone.

There was still no direct news from the Germans, but hints began to filter through that they might soon consider permitting the Government to make its headquarters at Versailles. Alibert went up to Paris on 17 October and Peyrouton three days later, again in the hope of establishing a contact that would cut out Laval; but neither of them succeeded and Laval remained the only member of the Cabinet with a permanent pass, and made disturbingly frequent use of it.

The Germans, however, had not forgotten them. On 4 October Hitler had met Mussolini at the Brenner Pass and, to quote

Ciano, 'put at least some of his cards on the table and talked to us about his plans for the future'. Since he made no mention of it, it appeared that Hitler had no intention of trying to invade Britain that year.

He was now willing to consider allowing France a limited co-operation with the Axis countries. Her economic help would be valuable if the war continued for a long time; her Mediterranean coastline would be useful if he decided to move troops to North Africa. He sketched these thoughts to Mussolini without mentioning that they were really Göring's; his own Wagnerian vision baulked at any stretch of water too wide for a swan to ferry him across and his landlocked eyes were already directed eastward.

Hitler's interest in France was whetted by the arrival of Pétain's delayed message through Colonel Fonck on 8 October, and by a speech which Pétain broadcast on 11 October, outlining the aims of the 'National Revolution' and hinting broadly at France's willingness to work with Germany. 'On the morrow of her victory over our armies, Germany can choose between a traditional peace of oppression and an entirely new peace of collaboration. . . . In the presence of a conqueror who knows how to dominate his victory, we shall know how to dominate our defeat.' It was evident that the Marshal was not too deaf to listen to Laval's arguments.

On 20 October Laval was in Paris when he received a telephone call from Abetz who told him that he hoped to arrange the long-awaited interview with Ribbentrop on the 22nd. He asked Laval to meet him at the Embassy at ten o'clock on that morning and to bring an overnight bag with him. Laval hurried back to Vichy and the following morning asked for a private interview with Pétain.

It did not remain private for long. Baudouin insisted on being admitted to the discussion. He did not learn much. Laval said that he was hoping that important events would shortly occur, but could tell them nothing at the moment. It is possible that he had already told the Marshal of the expected interview with Ribbentrop. As with many people who make much of their 'word of honour', the Marshal's statements were never to be relied on unless each was prefaced by this phrase. He told Baudouin, after

Laval had gone, that he had no precise idea of what was going on and that Laval was intolerably vague. 'I am a soldier, accustomed to working on written reports, clearly presented.'

The Marshal assured Baudouin that next time Laval went to Paris, Baudouin should go with him. At midday Bouthillier, Peyrouton and Huntziger gathered anxiously in Baudouin's office to discuss what Laval might be up to. The rumour had gone round Vichy that it was something very important indeed: Laval was said to have taken his top-hat with him.

When Laval arrived at the Embassy in the Rue de Lille at 10 a.m. on 22 October, he noticed that there were more cars and uniforms in the courtyard than usual. He got into Abetz's car and asked where they were going, but Abetz replied that he did not know and pointed to another car in front which was to be their guide. They drove westwards out of Paris and then turned south-west along Route Nationale No. 10.

'Rambouillet?' asked Laval. Abetz said he thought it would be much farther than that.

'Then where are we going to lunch?' Laval asked. 'You know, it's a matter of some importance to me.' Abetz assured him that a suitable lunch had been arranged. They branched off at Rambouillet and continued through Maintenon and Chartres, heading for the Loire. Laval finally got his lunch at Tours, a little late in the afternoon, at the Hôtel de l'Univers, which was the German garrison headquarters. Laval had a chat with the mayor while Abetz made a series of telephone calls about a mysterious 'Erika'.

'Well,' Laval asked at last, 'where's Monsieur Ribbentrop?'

'He isn't here,' Abetz answered. 'But at five we leave again. I don't know where to. The pilot car will lead us.'

Darkness was falling when they set off and the car headed back over the Loire, northward again. They turned off on to a side road, winding and tree-lined. Laval had no idea where they were.

Abetz leaned towards him and said: 'Do you know who you are going to see?'

'Certainly,' said Laval, a little suspiciously. 'I'm going to see Monsieur Ribbentrop.'

'Yes,' said Abetz with a self-satisfied smirk. 'But it is not only

Herr Ribbentrop whom you will see; you will also see Chancellor Hitler.'

'*Merde!*' said Laval, in delighted astonishment.

In the darkness outside he noticed lines of soldiers under the trees and then the car drew up in a dusty square in front of a flat-fronted, two-storied railway station indistinguishable from a hundred others in France: the Gare de Montoire.

From the town beyond there was neither light nor sound. Five hundred German soldiers had descended on the town the day before, cut the telephones and electric light, put the mayor under house arrest, ordered the inhabitants to keep indoors with their shutters closed and sent round patrols armed with sub-machine-guns. All rail traffic had been stopped; all level-crossings closed. A fatigue party had fetched pot-plants and shrubs from Tours and the red carpet from the church. Army telephones were installed in the post office and anti-aircraft-guns set up on the surrounding hills and particularly around the tunnel at Saint-Rimay, two miles up the line towards Vendôme.

At 6 p.m. German aircraft had begun to circle over the town, and a little more than half an hour later the cause of all the excitement steamed into the station from Vendôme: Erika, the Führer's thirty-coach private train, accompanied by Ribbentrop's more modest train with about half that number of coaches. The engines kept up steam in case it became necessary to make a hurried retirement to the tunnel at Saint-Rimay. It was more than an hour before Laval arrived.

He stepped out into a confusion of uniforms and was led through the potted plants on to the station platform. Beyond lay four tracks and three more platforms. He stepped across the first set of rails, over the red carpet from the church, and on to the first platform, where Ribbentrop and the interpreter, Dr Schmidt, were waiting to greet him. In a welter of photographers and blinded by flashlights, Laval found himself hoisted into the train and bumping against somebody in the dim light. 'I beg your pardon,' he said. 'I didn't see you.' Hitler offered him his hand and invited him to sit down.

It was a comparatively short talk by Hitlerian standards, not more than two hours and not prefaced by the usual ranting attacks.

Hitler made no mention of the French refusal to hand over the North African bases in July and passed rapidly over his usual reproach that France had wanted war – and declared it – not he.

However, he continued, somebody had to pay for the war and it would not be Germany, who had not desired it. The war was not yet over and the reckoning must be deferred, but the result was already certain. Germany would win it by crushing blows.

Laval called on Dr Schmidt to bear witness that he had always striven for an understanding with Germany. But it would have to be an understanding that France could accept. 'I have not come here to plead the cause of France,' he said. 'I have come for something else. Our countries must no longer meet every twenty-five years on the battlefield. We have fought, as you have fought. We have piled up enough glory, one against the other. Only an honourable peace for France can end this rivalry and establish our relations on a solid basis. If it were otherwise we should wait and, some day, turn against you.' He had been fumbling for his pen and discovered that he had forgotten to bring it with him. Hitler handed him his own pencil and memo pad.

'I could make a vengeful peace,' Hitler replied. 'I have the right and the power. But I have not come here for that. I offer you collaboration. You can refuse it. You have the right to wait and hope for an English victory. But in that case I shall make a different peace and, if England offers me a compromise peace, I shall not add to Germany's sufferings by sparing France.'

These were precisely Laval's anticipations and fears. He assured Hitler that he was wholeheartedly in favour of collaboration, provided that France was fairly treated and did not lose any of her territory. Hitler said that he could give no assurance as far as Africa was concerned but, if France were for example required to give up Tunisia to Italy, there was no reason why she should not be compensated at Britain's expense by being given Nigeria.

The conversation ended when Laval said that he had not expected to meet the Chancellor and would like to consult Pétain before committing himself on any point. Hitler answered that he would be very glad to meet the Marshal: would Laval please arrange a meeting for the day after next?

Laval hurried off to a telephone, delighted with the day's work. He telephoned a report to Pétain and then went back to Tours to spend the night. With Abetz's permission he kept with him the First Counsellor of the German Embassy, Achenbach, whose full-dress uniform he hoped would impress the Marshal when the invitation was officially offered the next day. In Vichy Baudouin heard the news soon after 10 p.m. and held a frenzied conference with Huntziger. The Marshal, after receiving Laval's telephone call, had quietly gone to bed.

Baudouin was up in the Marshal's room at ten the following morning and found him looking, he thought, rather worried and nervous. Pétain said he would call a full Council of Ministers at 5 p.m. to hear Laval's report and added that 'from what Laval had told him' he gathered that Hitler wanted to talk with him, probably the next day or the day after. 'What ought I to do?' he asked Baudouin.

Baudouin, now that Laval had completely outmanoeuvred him, reverted to his *attentiste* argument. 'You'd better put that question to Laval. We're now in the situation to which his secret negotiations were bound to lead us. There is only one line of conduct for us: stick to the armistice convention and do our best to apply it.' The Marshal soothed him by telling him to get ready to accompany him to the talks.

At 3.30 p.m. Laval arrived in a German car, accompanied by the tall, blond Achenbach in his impressive green uniform with white facings. Alibert and Peyrouton had been alerted and had dashed back from Paris to give their support to Baudouin. When Laval reached his office on the second floor he was told of the hubbub that had been going on and immediately went up the stairs to make sure that the Marshal was not wavering. (Though Laval later discovered that Pétain had been secretly negotiating with the British through Rougier, neither he nor Baudouin nor any other member of the Government learned of Pétain's approach to Hitler until after the war was over. They could have saved themselves a great deal of argument and energy.)

During the Council of Ministers the lobby of the Hôtel du Parc began to fill unaccountably with policemen, summoned by Alibert and Peyrouton in anticipation of Laval's defeat. But

once again there was nobody capable of standing up against Laval's onslaught. He seemed, said Bouthillier, 'like a man who believed himself called by destiny'. He reported briefly on his conversation with Hitler, underlining the fact that the discussion had been in general terms and that he had not undertaken any commitments.

'It would be a crime against France not to respond to Hitler's offer,' he said. 'We shall have to suffer reprisals from the British; but we must accept every risk to seize the magnificent opportunity which is within France's reach at this moment.

'France is at a turning-point,' he continued in the face of objections. 'Some individuals may criticise and obstruct me – I don't give a hoot. I am convinced that I am defending my country well.'

In something like a frenzy, he turned on Bouthillier and spat out: 'France has lost the war. I will do my damndest to prevent you – you and the others – from making her lose the peace!'

At the end of the Council Baudouin remained behind with Pétain. As he came out of Pétain's study, he found Laval waiting for him with a paper in his hand. It was a note that Baudouin had left with the Marshal at lunchtime, again urging Pétain to adhere rigidly to the armistice terms.

Laval was frothing with rage. He told Baudouin that his note was nonsense and 'the proof of a really terrifying lack of imagination'. Baudouin flounced off and Laval went into the Marshal's room to tell him that, if he intended to take Baudouin with him to meet Hitler, then Laval would call the whole thing off.

The scurrying up and down the staircases of the Hôtel du Parc continued until late into the night. Du Moulin de la Barthète, the Marshal's civil secretary, went down to pump Laval and found him in good spirits again. 'This interview between the two Heads of State, it's an event, an historic event. A bit different from a lunch at Chequers, anyway.'

While the others grumbled that the Marshal was being 'kidnapped like a young girl from a convent', Pétain told Du Moulin that only he and Dr Ménétrel were to accompany him. 'I don't want a large suite. Above all, no soldiers. Rendezvous in

front of the lift at 7 a.m.' Fernet was sent down to the first floor to tell Baudouin that Laval had threatened to resign if Baudouin went with the party. 'I ask Baudouin to put up even with that,' was the Marshal's message.

Du Moulin, wandering down from his bedroom on the fourth floor, had a final conversation with the Marshal, who had put on his dressing-gown but was too excited to sleep. The devious old gentleman was still pretending to be hesitant about the meeting.

'Postpone the interview? I've certainly considered it. But Laval tells me that would offend Hitler and we should pay dearly for it. Why get excited, anyway? It's a battle between the earthenware pot and the iron pot. We are not free.'

In the dismal grey morning light, three cars and the Marshal's motor-cycle escort waited outside the Hôtel du Parc. The Marshal emerged from the lift, accompanied by Du Moulin and Ménétrel, and joined Laval in the lobby. Ménétrel, despite the Marshal's stipulation of 'no soldiers', had been shrewd enough to put on his uniform as a major in the Medical Corps and was invited to take his place with Pétain and Laval in the first car. The Marshal, his cheeks glowing pinkly from Ménétrel's regular morning electric massage, was wearing the *Médaille Militaire* on his Verdun tunic under a well-worn raincoat. De Brinon shared the second car with Achenbach, and Du Moulin, in civilian clothes, got into the third car alone, fuming at the trick that Ménétrel had played on him.

At Moulins, where they crossed the demarkation line, the cars stopped first on one side of the bridge of La Madeleine for the Marshal to inspect the German guard of honour, then on the other side for him to receive the German area commander. A German car headed the procession and moved so smartly that the Marshal's motor-cycle escort got left behind. During a halt for them to catch up, Laval nipped out of the Marshal's car, where he had been dying for a cigarette but afraid of spoiling the old man's temper by lighting one, and changed places with de Brinon. They arrived at Tours in a thin drizzle of rain and Laval went off to lunch with Achenbach while Pétain was entertained by the prefect of Indre-et-Loire.

A little before five o'clock they were on their way again,

travelling more slowly and soon turning on to a side road. Laval began to recognise the route and the tree-lined verges where companies of the Wehrmacht stood with their arms at the present and their equipment gleaming in the watery sunset. It was Montoire again.

This time Hitler was waiting on the platform, with Ribbentrop and Keitel. He stepped forward and Pétain offered him his hand. The flashlights flared. The Marshal, despite his shabby raincoat, had an air of cool authority that compared well with Hitler's manufactured intensity and ineluctable hint of a Berlin bus-inspector in his own raincoat and too-high peaked cap. The Führer gazed intently into the old soldier's blue eyes and said: 'I am happy to shake the hand of a Frenchman who is not responsible for the war.' The Marshal, who had little German and was always hard of hearing when there were witnesses present, answered: 'Quite well, thank you; quite well.' To their great annoyance, Du Moulin, Ménétrel and de Brinon were shuffled off into an adjoining coach and set down before a table loaded with rolls, butter, mineral water and twenty different kinds of *wurst*, while Laval accompanied Pétain into the Führer's compartment.

After all the excitement at Vichy, and despite the shock waves that were to spread round the world, the talks were vague and inconclusive: a restatement of good intentions on each side which did not go beyond what Hitler and Laval had said to each other two days before. During the intervening forty-eight hours, Hitler had been down to the Spanish frontier, to talk with Franco at Hendaye. He had discovered that the Caudillo, though full of expressions of gratitude for the help that Hitler and Mussolini had given him in winning the civil war, was determined to put so high a price on his intervention that Hitler, never more than lukewarm about the Mediterranean project, decided to drop it. Of his nine-hour attempt to persuade Franco to co-operate, he told Mussolini: 'Rather than go through that again, I would prefer to have three or four teeth out.'

The conversation ended after an hour and a half and Hitler ushered the Marshal to the station entrance and into his car. It was agreed that Hitler would put on paper his thoughts about collaboration; Pétain would make a broadcast recommending it.

The French party returned to Tours for the night and the following morning Laval went on to Paris while Pétain visited a prisoner-of-war camp at Amboise before returning to Vichy. Baudouin sulked in his room and refused to go down to join the reception committee. The following day he handed in his resignation as Foreign Minister, but was persuaded by Pétain to stay in the Cabinet as a Secretary of State.

[8]

THE GERMAN PROPAGANDA machine triumphantly broadcast the news of the meeting at Montoire and copies of the photograph showing the leaders of Germany and France hand in hand. In Britain and America there was consternation and foreboding.

The great fear in the West was for the future of the French naval bases and fleet. From Britain the King sent a personal message to Pétain, calling on him to reject proposals which would dishonour France. From America Roosevelt warned him that the handing over of the fleet would completely destroy the traditional friendship between their two countries and that America would no longer offer protection to the French colonies in the West Indies.

In the British Cabinet confusion was added to concern by the fact that, shortly before Montoire, Professor Rougier had at last made contact with Sir Alexander Cadogan, Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office. Sir Alexander, having thickened the fog of mystification by insisting that Rougier should have no contact with the Gaullists, then passed him on to Lord Halifax and Winston Churchill.

With the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister, Rougier discussed the basis of an agreement under which France would not attempt to recapture her dissident colonies; would not hand over any air or naval bases to the Axis; would scuttle her fleet rather than surrender it; and would join Britain in the war when the time was ripe. In return, Britain would restore France to her former strength and possessions; would not interfere with her trade between North Africa and the unoccupied zone; would not

try to take away any of her colonies by force; and would refrain from any further wireless attacks on Pétain. With this outline agreed on Rougier began his voyage back to Vichy, where he was to arrive on 8 November.

Laval was convinced that the Montoire meeting had been a great success and that now, with Hitler's blessing, he could embark on a great campaign to extort concessions from the Germans. At the first Council of Ministers after his return from Paris, he launched into a triumphant harangue:

'We must take account of this tremendous thing: the victor coming to offer collaboration to the vanquished.' (This mistaken belief that it was Hitler who had asked to see Pétain, and not Pétain who had first approached Hitler, was to lead him into progressively grave errors of judgment as time went on.) 'Weather conditions have not permitted the landing so far; but the defeat of Britain is certain. The Germans are making a gigantic effort. The race is clearly in their favour. Well – war costs dearly. The conquered pay.

'“France will pay,” the Chancellor said, “unless she agrees to collaborate with us.” . . . There's the choice: collaborate, and in that case England will pay. If, by mischance, England made a compromise, it is we who would have to pay. Everything depends on the attitude of France: a positive attitude and not an attitude of *attente*.'

Hoping to strike while the iron was hot, he set off for Paris again, taking Bouthillier and Huntziger with him to discuss the relaxation of the German demands for occupation costs and the release of prisoners for the purpose of strengthening the French colonial defences. They lunched at the German Embassy and then began their discussions with Abetz, Dr Hemmen, the German economic representative, and General von Stülpnagel. The Germans refused to budge an inch and even increased their demands, to the astonishment not only of Laval but also of Bouthillier, who remarked: 'Hitler has made the offer, it is the Germans who are dodging out of it.'

Laval threw himself into the fray, darting from group to group, hurling arguments at them like projectiles. 'Uplifted by a vision,' said the unwillingly admiring Bouthillier, 'he acted like a

prophet certain of saving his people and preparing their future. . . . Face to face with these massive Germans, he spoke like a proud man. . . . He did not say, "March with us, you will see what service we shall give you," but "The Führer is a great man because he has understood that he cannot make Europe without France. . . ."

"This man was undoubtedly inspired by a faith. At Vichy, some days later, recalling these fiery moments that he had experienced at the Embassy, he said to me: "My secret at such a time is to believe myself big. The more perilous the situation, the more inaccessible the person I am talking to, the bigger I feel!" "

Pétain was perturbed by the capital that de Gaulle was making out of Montoire. With his stock depressed by the Dakar fiasco, and unable to persuade the British Government to accord him any recognition other than as leader of the French military forces in exile, de Gaulle had decided to set up an independent headquarters in French Equatorial Africa. It was from Brazzaville on 27 October that he launched his first direct attack on the legality of Pétain's claim to be the Head of the French State.

"There is no longer a truly French Government. . . . The body that has its seat at Vichy and claims to bear that name is unconstitutional. . . . It is necessary therefore for a new authority to assume the burden of directing the French war effort. Events are imposing this sacred duty upon me.' He issued 'Ordinance No. 1'. 'In the name of the French People and the French Empire, we, General de Gaulle, leader of the Free French, ordain . . .'

Pétain had still to keep his promise to Hitler to broadcast a recommendation of the new policy. He took the opportunity of replying to de Gaulle's attack at the same time.

'It was of my own free will that I accepted the Führer's invitation,' he said. 'He who has taken into his hands the destiny of France has the duty to create the most favourable atmosphere for the safekeeping of the nation's interests. It is in honour . . . that I today enter on the path of collaboration. Thus in the near future the burden of suffering of our country may be lightened, the fate of our prisoners ameliorated, the occupation charges alleviated, the demarkation line, the administrative facilities and the provisioning of the country modified . . .

'France is tied by numerous obligations towards her conqueror. At least she remains a sovereign State. This sovereignty obliges her to defend her soil, to dispel differences of opinion, to suppress the dissidence in her colonies. This policy is mine. The Ministers are responsible only to me. It is I alone whom History will judge.'

This might well upset the British again and, now that Laval had taken over the Foreign Ministry from Baudouin, it was impossible to reassure them through ordinary diplomatic channels. On the evening of his broadcast Pétain arranged for Baudouin to smuggle the Portuguese representative, Senhor Gama-Ochoa, into his room and asked him to inform his Prime Minister, Dr Salazar, that in no circumstances would the Marshal permit an act of hostility against England. And would the Prime Minister please pass that message on to Whitehall?

There remained the problem of public opinion in France. As usual, with Hitler brooding over his *Drang nach Osten*, his gang-leaders in the Wehrmacht, S.S. and Wilhelmstrasse had returned to their private projects and feuds. While Abetz, and Ribbentrop above him, were probably genuine in their desire to come to an understanding with France, Himmler was busily aryanising and intimidating any territory that he could get a grip on. Immediately after Montoire, Bürckel, the *gauleiter* appointed to govern Lorraine, announced that all Lorrainers who refused to accept German citizenship were to be expelled from the province. The move would begin on 3 November, with the despatch of four trains a day to the unoccupied zone, each containing a thousand Lorrainers with no more possessions than they could carry with them.

Abetz approached the military commander of Lorraine, but the General was unwilling to cross swords with a *gauleiter*. Laval obtained an interview with Göring at the Ritz in Paris on 9 November, but Göring pretended, or perhaps genuinely believed, that Laval was exaggerating: 'I don't know anything about the matter. What you say is too strong. I don't believe such a thing is possible. Probably it's a matter of the expulsion of a few Jews. I'll have a word with Hitler about it.' Eventually Abetz managed to see Hitler himself and got the expulsions suspended,

but by then nearly 70,000 Lorrainers had been sent into exile.

Alibert read to the Marshal reports from all over the country, criticising him. Pétain decided on a popularity tour. At Lyon, where most of the unfortunate refugees had been brought, his reception was noticeably cool. The point was not lost on him. And Bouthillier drove it home by remarking that the time had come when it was simply a question of which one of them would have to go: Laval or the Marshal.

In discussion with Abetz, Laval had outlined the concessions that he hoped to get when he met Ribbentrop: the release of an initial batch of 150,000 prisoners; the reduction of the occupation costs by more than half; a modification of the control on the demarkation line; and the transfer of the administration of the northern departments from Brussels to Vichy. Although Abetz communicated these demands to Berlin, it would have been surprising if Laval had obtained even half of them. Nevertheless, with such a great prize dangled before his eyes, Laval was prepared to go to considerable lengths to convince the Germans of the French willingness to collaborate.

He had agreed in principle to the German purchase of the French holdings in the copper mines at Bor, in Yugoslavia, on which Germany had blocked all payments since the armistice. He now agreed to return 200 tons of gold which the Banque de France was holding on behalf of the Banque Nationale of Belgium.

Baudouin, Bouthillier and the Marshal, without Laval's knowledge, had already offered to return the gold and had given the Banque de France an indemnity against any subsequent claims; but the Germans insisted that the gold should be handed to their representative, while the Belgians insisted that it should be handed to theirs. At this, Vichy stuck in its heels.

Laval, waiting for the signal to go to Berlin, had no patience with Vichy's legalistic arguments, since it was clear that, whether the gold was handed to the Germans or to the Belgians, the Germans could lay their hands on it whenever they liked. It was, in any case, less than ten per cent of the gold in the vaults of the Banque de France, on which the Germans might cast their eyes next. From the Hôtel Matignon he rang Bouthillier, who

was also in Paris, and said: 'I hear there are still difficulties about the Belgian gold?'

'Yes,' Bouthillier answered. 'In any case, the German position is not defensible.'

All Laval's irritation at pernickety officialdom crackled over the telephone: 'It's not a question of whether it's defensible, but of whether my policy requires that I should give them satisfaction. I'm not telling you what should be decided. I'm telling you what *is* decided.'

Bouthillier, though accustomed to this sort of rough language at Cabinet meetings, did not intend to put up with it in his own office. 'I've a word to say first. I don't see why you are in such a hurry. It's several days since Monsieur Hemmen——'

'Monsieur Hemmen is here,' Laval interrupted. 'He's with me while I'm talking to you.'

Bouthillier hurried round to the Hôtel Matignon to continue his protest, thoroughly enraged at having been addressed in such a fashion before the German economic adviser. Controlling his anger, he began a detailed explanation of the grounds for Vichy's refusal to hand over the gold. Laval cut him short: 'I'm leaving for Berlin. This is important. What does your gold matter to me? I'm thinking of the prisoners, of the French, of the future of my country. Ribbentrop insists on having the gold – I'll give it to him!'

Bouthillier left, muttering to himself: 'I'll never work with that man again.' In the evening Laval took Darlan and Huntziger to a conference at the German Embassy on France's measures to regain her colonies from de Gaulle. Laval declared himself enthusiastically in favour. Huntziger pointed out that the rainy season would have arrived before the instructors (to be released from among the prisoners in Germany, together with a complement of N.C.O.s) could have trained enough troops. Darlan said nothing.

The General and the Admiral went back to Vichy and assured the Council of Ministers that they had not supported Laval. Bouthillier recounted his rough handling over the Belgian gold. The Council passed on to criticisms of the Press and radio, which came under Laval's control. The tension and hatred mounted in

the yellow drawing-room of the Pavillon Sévigné; yet the shadow of Laval, two hundred miles away in Paris, still hung over the Council table. 'If the absent man had been there,' said Baudouin, 'nobody would have said a word.'

The Marshal was leaving for a visit to Marseille that evening. Before he went to the station, Baudouin had a private word with him, insisting that Laval was dragging them all to perdition and that the British would never forgive Pétain for any breach of the secret agreement made through Rougier. Baudouin then called a conference with the two other principal conspirators: Bouthillier and Peyrouton. They agreed that the Marshal must be kept at the sticking-point day and night. Peyrouton would work on him during the visit to Marseille on 3 December; Bouthillier would take over for the Toulon journey on 4 December; Baudouin would resume when the Marshal returned.

During the trip to Marseille, the Marshal seemed to be slipping out of their grasp. Peyrouton continually pointed out what damage Laval was doing to his policy and his reputation, but Pétain fobbed him off with the excuse that he could think of nobody to put in Laval's place. Bouthillier was better prepared when he took over at Toulon.

The Marshal took lunch on board the battleship *Strasbourg* which had escaped from Mers-el-Kebir. Bouthillier sat next to Darlan and asked if the conspirators could count on his support. Darlan avoided the question but, that evening, as they strolled up and down the station platform in the darkness, waiting for the Marshal's train to leave, Darlan said: 'Old friend, at a signal from you, I will march with you to the end.'

On one of the two sofas in the drawing-room car, Bouthillier sat next to Pétain as the train rumbled back towards Marseille. 'When certain principles are at stake, Monsieur le Maréchal, one must take one side or the other,' he said. 'No matter what the consequences may be. You have decided to dismiss Monsieur Laval. It would be as well to set your reasons in order.' This he proceeded to do for the Marshal: collaboration was not truly the Marshal's policy; the French people were not in favour of collaboration; they would not accept this policy, which was Laval's and not the Marshal's.

'You are quite right,' said Pétain.

Bouthillier asked whom the Marshal had in mind to replace Laval and Pétain mentioned François-Poncet, an obviously impossible choice, since the Germans detested him. Bouthillier put forward Flandin, whom he had sounded out in Paris a fortnight earlier. The Marshal protested that this was yet another politician, but Bouthillier assured him that Flandin could be counted on to carry out the *attentiste* policy that they were all agreed on.

Pétain then asked what sort of man Flandin was, although, as Bouthillier well knew, he had served with Flandin and Laval in Doumergue's Cabinet and had stayed at Flandin's home. There were times when the Marshal rather baffled Bouthillier with his pretended ignorance and his passion for secrecy. 'It was worthy of notice,' he once said, 'that the Marshal, whose memory was failing, never once made a mistake about which one of us it was to whom he had confided a particular secret.' And no one of them ever knew half the secret negotiations in which the Marshal was involved.

Bouthillier assured him that Flandin was a worthy fellow, loving nothing better than the simple life in his native village (a portrait in which Flandin, whose tastes ran to fast cars and cosmopolitan society, would have found difficulty in recognising himself). And, above all, Flandin could explain things in an orderly fashion, argue patiently, demonstrate clearly, in brief, behave quite differently from the passionate, disorganised Laval.

'Very well,' said the Marshal, 'let us decide on Flandin and no more discussions. But you make me want to see him. Ask him to come to Vichy.'

'It is already arranged,' Bouthillier replied. 'Monsieur Flandin will be in Vichy on Friday.'

The Marshal smiled and took his hand: 'You have given me a good night's rest.'

[9]

THE NEXT DAY was a busy one for the Marshal. Baudouin, Alibert and Peyrouton were in his study at 11 a.m. and did not

leave until 1 p.m. In the afternoon Pétain had another secret visitor. This was Jacques Chevalier, Under-Secretary to the Minister of Education and a friend of Lord Halifax since his Oxford days. He came to tell the Marshal that Pierre Dupuy, the Canadian Minister at Vichy, had brought a message from the British Foreign Minister, offering an agreement on much the same terms as that already discussed with Rougier. Pétain expressed his hearty approval and arranged to meet Dupuy the following day. This time, Baudouin was let into the secret; Admiral Fernet was not.

Laval's suspicions were aroused on Saturday, 7 December, when he learned that Flandin was in Vichy and had been to see Pétain; but he was still riding the crest of his wave of self-confidence. 'If they give any trouble, I'll rap on the table,' he said. 'They'll scatter like rabbits.'

He even felt himself in a strong enough position to demand that he should be made head of the Government, instead of Vice-President, so that the Germans should be better assured of his ability to carry out his promises. He went off to Paris again on 9 December for more talks at the Embassy. The Marshal whispered to Baudouin: 'All these plans will fall through. In a short time Laval will be nothing.'

Du Moulin, eager to press home the advantage, persuaded the Marshal that evening to write to Hitler telling him that he was getting rid of Laval. The letter was given to General de la Laurencie to take to Paris and it was only by good fortune that Bouthillier heard of the stupid manoeuvre the following morning and managed to have the letter recalled before it could reach Abetz's hands, and therefore Laval's. General de la Laurencie was also told that when the moment came he was to arrest Marcel Déat, who had been attacking the Government in his pro-Nazi newspaper, *L'Œuvre*. The signal would be: 'Madame la Maréchale has crossed the line.'

On Wednesday morning de Brinon telephoned from Paris to say that the Germans had agreed to the Marshal's return to Versailles as soon as he wished. The arrangements for the move had scarcely begun when de Brinon telephoned again and said that the permission was only for the Marshal and members of his

military staff: none of his Ministers was to accompany him.

This produced a fine fury of excitement in which Baudouin, Bouthillier and the others saw the Marshal falling entirely under Laval's spell and being persuaded by him to form a completely new Ministry at Versailles, leaving them all out of a job. The alarm increased during the course of the afternoon with the arrival of an invitation to the Marshal to go to Paris on Saturday for the ceremony of reintering the ashes of the Duc de Reichstadt in the Invalides.

This odd proposal was a revival of a pre-war plan to cement Franco-German friendship. Hitler, with his Napoleonic aspirations and sentimental interest in the great French dictator, thought it a magnificent idea to mark the hundredth anniversary of the restoration of Napoléon's own body to France by sending his son to join him. The warmth of this sentiment did not communicate itself to the Parisians, wrapped in their thickest winter clothing and sitting in front of empty grates. 'We need coal and they offer us ashes,' they grunted.

The Marshal, remembering the unfortunate effect of his hand-in-hand photograph with Hitler, told Baudouin that he had no intention of going. 'I don't want pictures of me surrounded by German soldiers.' But the next day Laval telephoned to say that Hitler was going to send the Marshal a personal invitation. Du Moulin rang Laval and said that the Marshal was not well enough to accept the invitation at such short notice. Abetz told Laval that the Marshal *must* come, for fear of insulting the Führer. In Vichy the conspirators mounted an hourly vigil over the Marshal, in case he should change his mind.

At ten o'clock on Friday the 13th, Bouthillier made his morning call on the Marshal and found him in a fine, firm frame of mind: he would certainly not go to Paris. At eleven Baudouin called and found him no less resolute: he would certainly get rid of Laval. At 12.30, as the Marshal was going out for his walk before lunch, he ran into Laval, who had just arrived from Paris with Josée and de Brinon.

The Marshal was in a jovial mood. Josée had brought him a pair of gold cuff-links from an American friend in Paris. In answer to Laval's question, he said that he was quite looking forward to

going to Paris and thought he might make a *détour* to Rouen as well. Laval and Josée went off to Chateldon for lunch, leaving de Brinon to hand Pétain the official invitation from Hitler.

At lunch the Marshal was unaccountably silent and the others at his table, having heard of the encounter with Laval, became anxious. When the Marshal went off for his nap, Alibert told Du Moulin that he insisted on Déat's arrest and asked him for the code agreed upon with General de la Laurencie.

Peyrouton, who had also lunched at the Marshal's table, ran into Bouthillier in the narrow street between the Hôtel du Parc and the Hôtel Majestic and, taking him by the arm, led him into the New Park. 'It's all in the melting pot again,' he said. 'The Marshal is going to Paris. Brinon and Laval have won. There's even talk of going to Rouen. The Marshal is going alone with Laval.'

They walked up and down in the park, under a lowering sky, shivering under the bare trees, with the chilly grey Allier flowing swiftly past below the promenade. (*'C'est le seul Allier qui nous reste,'* somebody had punned recently.) 'It's all up if we don't act,' Peyrouton continued. 'The Marshal is going to fall a prey to those fellows.'

'It must be tonight,' said Bouthillier. Peyrouton nodded: 'I will arrest him: we mustn't let him stir up Abetz and that lot.'

They went back to Du Moulin's office and sent for Bernard Ménétrel and Dr Martin, the head of the special branch of supplementary police that had been recruited largely from Cagoullards. Martin proposed holding an immediate court-martial and executing Laval that night or alternatively shooting him out of hand. Peyrouton, a little more level-headed than some of his associates, objected that the Marshal might not approve.

While his fate was being discussed, Laval had come back from Chateldon and, with de Brinon, gone into the Marshal's room, where Du Moulin was on guard. They convinced the Marshal that a refusal would be too grave an insult to Hitler and that there was no need for him to be seen with German troops: he could wait inside the church at the Invalides to receive the coffin. The Marshal could stay at the Hôtel Matignon, since that was the only one of the official residences that it was still possible to

heat, and he could have his meals sent in from the Café de Paris.

'You can go for a walk in Paris the following morning – along the Boulevard des Invalides, in civilian dress, with your cane. Everybody will recognise you; everybody will salute you. . . .' The Marshal liked the thought and began to trace on the map a little tour that he could make on his way back: Rouen, Alençon, Bourges.

Du Moulin tiptoed out of the room and hurried to his office, where Baudouin, Alibert, Darlan and Huntziger had joined Peyrouton and Bouthillier. He told them of the Marshal's decision. They agreed that Laval must be got rid of immediately, though Huntziger hesitated for a time, fearing the German reaction. Having learned that the coast was clear and Laval had gone down to the second floor to keep an appointment with the Spanish Ambassador, they trooped into the Marshal's room.

Darlan had been appointed as spokesman. He told the Marshal that they were all agreed that Laval's policy must not be allowed to continue. Bouthillier, to stimulate Huntziger as well as the Marshal, read out the headline of the latest issue of *L'Œuvre* which he had just received. Alluding to the fact that Corap's army, which had let the Germans make their fatal break-through in the Ardennes, had been supported on the right by Huntziger's army, the headline said simply but effectively: 'Sedan was not on Corap's right wing but on Huntziger's left.'

The Marshal reddened and said: 'They're trying to interfere with recruiting, and Laval is covering up for them. Very well. This is the opportunity. We must finish with it.'

Peyrouton suggested that he should put Laval under house arrest at Chateldon. Darlan interposed to say that Laval should be treated with respect, in view of his high position, and Peyrouton agreed. It was arranged that there should be a special Council meeting at 8 p.m. at which Laval would be asked for his resignation.

In his office on the third floor, Du Moulin was preparing the letter that would inform Hitler of Laval's dismissal. He had already telephoned the various secretariats to announce the special Council of Ministers at eight. Suddenly the door opened and Laval walked in.

'What's this Council of Ministers?' he asked. 'Nobody said anything about it just now.' (He had just come from a routine Cabinet meeting.) Du Moulin said he thought the Marshal probably wanted to announce his decision to go to Paris. 'It seems pretty odd,' said Laval. 'Alibert's mixed up in this somewhere.'

He was pacing up and down the room, sniffing danger. He turned and asked what Du Moulin was writing. Du Moulin had slipped the second and third sheets under his blotter and showed Laval the innocuous opening phrases. Laval asked him how he was going to end the letter. Du Moulin said: 'with my best wishes'. Laval protested that in addressing Hitler it should be at least 'with my highest consideration'. He continued to walk backwards and forwards, muttering: 'What cretins! And we're trying to remake France with a lot like this!'

From the passage outside came the sound of footsteps. The Ministers were gathering for the Council meeting two doors away. Laval joined them and asked what the meeting was about. Nobody seemed to know. Then the Marshal entered, accompanied by Fernet and Baudouin, and put the form of collective resignation on the table in front of Laval. It was the same formula that he had used on two previous occasions: 'I ask each of you to sign this letter of resignation.'

Laval had for some time been campaigning for the dismissal of Belin, the Minister of Labour. Though he guessed that something was afoot, it still had not occurred to him that anybody would have the courage to try to oust him. He put his signature to the paper and passed it on. Pétain asked Baudouin to bring him the paper when all had signed, and retired to his office to wait.

At this moment, Laval began to feel uneasy. His face darkening, he walked out into the corridor. Peyrouton went over to Baudouin and told him there was nothing to fear: there were troops around the hotel, police in it, and the telephone-wires were cut. He had no sooner finished speaking than Ménétrel dashed in from the Marshal's room, looking so white in the face that Baudouin for a moment thought the old man had had a sudden illness. But Ménétrel's agitation was due simply to the fact that

Laval had gone round to the door of Pétain's office and was asking to see him.

While Baudouin took the completed letter in to the Marshal, Laval was told that the Marshal was unable to see him. He returned to the Council table. Pétain entered with Baudouin following him.

The old man's face was very white. The Ministers were standing beside their chairs.

'The resignations of Monsieur Laval and Monsieur Ripert are accepted,' he said. (Ripert, who in fact had not resigned but was in Paris at the moment, owed the inclusion of his name in this dramatic statement to the fact that Pétain had decided to give Ripert's job as Minister of Education to Jacques Chevalier.)

Laval's face was flushed to a deep brown; his hands gripped the back of his chair and his body tautened as if he would leap at the Marshal.

'What's this, Monsieur le Maréchal?' he growled. 'You received me just this afternoon and didn't mention a word about it.'

'This afternoon I was still hesitating,' said Pétain. 'Now it is decided. The newspapers inspired by Abetz approve your policy while outbidding and attacking the Government.'

'I can't help it,' shouted Laval. 'These journalists aren't under my orders. You must get used to being knocked about by the Press.'

'These are newspapers inspired by the Germans,' Pétain replied. 'I know nothing of what you do in Paris. Every time you go there, I wonder with what new disaster we are going to pay for your journey. You do not have the confidence of the French people. You do not have my own.'

Laval loosed his grip on the back of the chair and straightened himself. Lifting his hooded eyelids to stare straight into the Marshal's eyes, he said slowly: 'I have never thought of anything but the interest of France. I hope, Monsieur le Maréchal, that your decision will not bring too much misfortune to my country.' Always he had annoyed his opponents with the possessiveness with which he spoke not of *le pays* or *notre pays* but *mon pays*. Now the expression grated on their ears for the last time.

He looked round the room and saw triumph in every eye. 'You will not refuse to shake my hand?' he asked the Marshal. Pétain shook hands and Laval walked out of the room and down to his own office. He tried to ring his wife and Josée in Chateldon, but could not get through. He packed up some personal papers and told his chauffeur, Boudot, to take them in the car to the Hôtel Matignon in Paris. He found de Brinon and went down with him to the hotel restaurant for dinner. He had ordered his private coach to be attached to the train that left at midnight. As they went in to dinner, Darlan, who had promised the others that he would 'march with them to the end', was going out of the hotel door to the darkness and safety of a cinema.

Huntziger telegraphed Pétain's reply to Hitler to the Armistice Commission and Alibert's secretary rang General de la Laurencie in Paris to give the order for Déat to be arrested. 'Madame la Maréchale crossed the line at 1700 hours,' he said.

The General, having completely forgotten the code he had been given, flew into a military frenzy: 'What! The Maréchale bottled up at the demarkation line since five o'clock? It's eight o'clock now and I've no idea when I can get her on her way. Somebody had better make it clear to her that I'm not responsible for this discourtesy.' He slammed down the receiver and then tried to make contact with the German military commander.

Fortunately for the conspirators, before Laurencie could get hold of the Germans, Vichy was on the line again with yells of 'The password! The password!'

The bewildered Laurencie then telephoned Du Moulin to confirm the order. Finally he telephoned the Prefect of Police, Roger Langeron, who put policemen on guard outside Déat's house when he returned from working on *L'Œuvre* at 2 a.m. and arrested him in bed at 7 a.m.

Laval returned from dinner at 10 p.m. and began to sort out official documents to be handed over to the permanent head of the Foreign Office. While he was doing this, Ralph Heinzen, the American representative of United Press, dodged past the policemen in the lobby and came up to Laval's room to tell him that Boudot had been arrested. Laval telephoned Peyrouton to demand an explanation, but Peyrouton had him told that he was

not in. In fact, he was marching up and down his unheated office, wrapped in his overcoat, gleefully telling Du Moulin of the plans for Laval's arrest.

Laval went up the stairs to the third floor and asked to see the Marshal. Pétain, who had just come up in the lift with a very attractive young woman, sent word out that he was asleep. Laval returned to his office and telephoned Du Moulin, who had by now returned from the Ministry of the Interior. Laval told him he wanted to see him.

When Du Moulin entered the room, Laval said: 'What's going on? They've just arrested my chauffeur. Heinzen saw him go off between two policemen. They've taken my car to police headquarters with all my papers. They've just locked one of my secretaries in his room. This is provocation. Are they going to chuck me into gaol?'

Du Moulin smiled appeasingly: 'But, Monsieur le Président, you don't really think that the Marshal——'

'Well, what's he bugging about at?'

'He's asleep.'

'Oh, so he's asleep. Well, go and wake him up. Tell him they want to arrest me, they're going over his head, disregarding his orders. Go on, then!'

Du Moulin went upstairs and tapped gently on the Marshal's door. Pétain himself opened it, clad in a dressing-gown and quite unperturbed. 'So he's dissatisfied, is he? He's only getting what he deserves. Tell him I'm asleep and try to play for time. It will all be over by eleven.'

They were taking turns to keep an eye on their prisoner and enjoy his discomfort. Du Moulin found Bernard Ménétreel with Laval, who was shouting: 'I tell you they're after my hide. And I've nothing to defend myself with.' He pulled a penknife from his pocket and flicked the blade open. 'The bastards!' His rage had mastered him. This was the 'Jamaican' again, boiling with resentment and ready to put his head down and attack all comers with flailing arms. Suddenly he shrugged his shoulders and said: 'Of course. Friday the thirteenth.'

In the corridor outside there was the clatter of police coming and going, of doors being bolted or burst open. Laval's associates

were being locked in their rooms and a black-helmeted, leather-jacketed trooper of the *Groupes de Protection* set on guard outside each door. The typists who slept in rooms on that floor were forced to undress and get into bed, put their lights out and leave their doors open.

The door of Laval's room opened and Mondanel, Controllor-General of the *Sûreté Nationale*, came in. 'Monsieur le Président,' he said, 'I have been ordered to arrest you.'

Laval asked to see the warrant, which Mondanel produced from his wallet. 'This is signed by Monsieur Peyrouton,' said Laval. 'Since when has the Minister of the Interior had the right to arrest the Vice-President of the Council?'

'He is acting on the orders of the Marshal,' Mondanel replied.

Laval's eyes narrowed, though this was no great surprise. 'It doesn't say so. I demand confirmation from Marshal Pétain.'

Mondanel went out and returned a few minutes later with General Laure, head of the Marshal's military secretariat. Laure confirmed that the order came from Pétain.

'Very well,' said Laval. 'Lead the way.' Surrounded by policemen, he walked past the sub-machine-guns of the *G.P.* troops who lined the corridor and stairs, down to the lobby, where there were still more police, and out into the freezing moonlit night. He could see the outline of army trucks and the rifles of the *Garde Mobile*. Mondanel got into a police car with him.

He was nervous now. As they drove through the night, under the shadows of trees at the wayside, he imagined he could feel the muzzle of a pistol at the nape of his neck. He gave a sigh of relief as they entered the village of Chateldon and drove up the slope to the château. Since ten o'clock two platoons of the *Garde Mobile* had been on duty there. Their commander had given permission for Mme Laval and Josée to drive in to Vichy to find out what was happening. He must have passed them on the way.

Mondanel told him that he was to be held in close arrest, with a policeman sleeping in his room. Laval persuaded him to permit the policeman to sleep outside the door instead. He settled down to wait for his wife and daughter to return.

DESPITE THE CUT telephone-wires and the road-blocks, the Vichy correspondent of the German News Bureau had managed to make his way to Moulins and telephone the news of Laval's arrest to his Paris office. On Saturday morning Abetz was confronted with the double arrest of Laval and Déat. He tried unsuccessfully to get Vichy on the telephone, and sent Achenbach to General de la Laurencie.

The General, still more bewildered than the night before, rang Du Moulin and bleated: 'You're leaving me in the dark. You're not telling me anything. What happened last night? I've just had a violent ticking-off from Herr Achenbach. He's been talking about Déat and the Montoire policy. I told him the Montoire policy has nothing to do with Déat's arrest and that it's simply a matter of internal policy and that Déat is a notorious Freemason.' As everybody except the General already knew, Achenbach himself had been a Freemason. Du Moulin did not care to go into this over the telephone and asked Laurencie to ring again if anything happened.

Less than half an hour later there was another call from Laurencie. 'I have to pass on new demands from the German Embassy. There are four. They demand the immediate release of Déat, the establishment of telephonic communication with Brinon, an undertaking not to proceed with the arrest of any other politicians, and an indication of what rights the French Government intends to claim in the matter of revoking constitutional acts. They would also like to know if the Marshal is of the opinion that Constitutional Act no. 4 could be revoked without the consent of the German authorities. And I should like to have a few words of explanation for my own guidance. I begin to understand less and less. . . .'

The reference to Constitutional Act No. 4 made it quite clear that Abetz had got wind of Laval's arrest. The Germans were in so fidgety a mood that they had moved armoured units up to the demarkation line at Moulins, Châlons and Bordeaux and were ready to quell what they took to be a revolt in the unoccupied

zone. The Marshal went into conference with Peyrouton, Bouthillier and Laure and agreed to accept the first three German demands but to reject the implications in the fourth. Du Moulin was told to telephone this information to General de la Laurencie.

'Can you give me any other information?' the General asked when he had taken down the message.

'Not at the moment,' said Du Moulin. 'But what do they think of Uncle Peter in Paris?'

This reference was much too subtle for the military mind. 'Uncle Peter?' the General repeated in astonishment.

'Never mind,' said Du Moulin. 'Have another look at Constitutional Act No. 4 and see if you can't find some connection between the text of that document and the demands of the people you've been talking with.'

This at least was an order, even if it did not make sense. 'Very good,' said the General briskly, and hung up.

De Brinon now came into Du Moulin's room to use his telephone to get in touch with Abetz. At the end of the conversation he reported that Abetz wished the Marshal to be told that on no account would the Duc de Reichstadt's ashes be handed over to General de la Laurencie, and that Abetz was counting on Pétain and Laval to take part in the ceremony. It was agreed to send Darlan and Laure to Paris instead.

The publication of the *Journal Officiel*, carrying the announcement of Laval's dismissal, had been delayed until 5 p.m. Two hours later, Pétain addressed the nation in a broadcast:

'I have just taken a decision which I consider to be in the interests of the country.

'M. Pierre Laval is no longer a member of the Government.

'M. Pierre-Etienne Flandin receives the portfolio of Foreign Affairs.

'Constitutional Act No. 4 which designates my successor is annulled.

'I have decided to take this step for important reasons of internal policy. It does not in any way affect our relations with Germany.

'I remain at the helm. The National Revolution continues.'

The Marshal had made his decision; but Abetz had not yet accepted it. He telephoned to Vichy to say that he would arrive

there on the 16th and that he expected to be received by the Marshal 'and by the Vice-President of the Council, Monsieur Pierre Laval.' At a reception at the Embassy that night he pointedly told journalists that he regarded Laval as 'the guarantee of Franco-German collaboration.'

Soon after midnight the gun-carriage with the bronze coffin of the Duc de Reichstadt, accompanied by mobile anti-aircraft-guns, was driven slowly from the Gare de l'Est to the Invalides. It could have been an impressive scene, with the snow falling gently in the light of a double row of torches. Instead, it was merely a testy one. When the coffin was handed over to the Paris Municipal Guard at the gates of honour in the Place Vauban, Darlan saluted Abetz and von Stülpnagel, and Abetz said curtly: 'Wait at your hotel. I have a very important communication to send you.'

Darlan and Laure accompanied the coffin to the catafalque that had been prepared for it before the high altar under the dome, where it was draped with an enormous tricolour flag whose corners fell upon the purple carpet encrusted with the imperial bees. They stood with heads bowed for a moment and then went back to their hotel. Darlan went straight to bed, leaving Laure to receive Abetz's message, which turned out to be that the Vichy Government was absolutely forbidden to make any mention of what had happened on 13 December. Laure woke Darlan, but Darlan did not intend to be involved. 'Get on with it yourself,' he grunted, and rolled back to sleep again.

Laure phoned the message to Du Moulin who, at that hour of the morning, could not get in touch with any of the Ministers. He decided that he had better obey the instructions, although the news had already been published in the *Journal Officiel* and by the Marshal's broadcast.

At nine o'clock that morning Darlan and Laure attended a mass for the Duc de Reichstadt and Abetz asked them to visit him at the Embassy afterwards. He embarked on an Hitlerian outburst against Laure, as the Marshal's personal representative, but detained Darlan after Laure had left and spoke to him in much gentler tones. He had already recognised a potential collaborator to take the place of Laval.

Laure returned to Vichy with a long face and reported that the German attitude seemed to be hardening into acceptance of the fact that the Marshal was entitled to make what Government changes he wished, but, if he persisted in rejecting Laval, the policy of collaboration was at an end and the armistice terms would be rigorously applied. This was what the conspirators had claimed they wanted; but, having got it, they were terrified that France would be choked to death.

Darlan arrived during the afternoon of 16 December and told the Marshal that Abetz was determined to have Alibert and Peyrouton dismissed for their part in Laval's arrest. He would demand that Laval should be reinstated, but he would probably accept that he should be brought back not as Vice-President but as one member of a triumvirate, the two other members to be Flandin and Darlan. It was evident that the Admiral had had a very useful talk with Abetz.

The Marshal had sent two emissaries to Paris to try to make contact with Göring and Keitel and so pass over the head of the dreaded Abetz, but there was no news from them. The only report that did arrive was that Abetz had refused Pétain's invitation to dinner and was on his way with an imposing escort. Du Moulin and the unfortunate Laure were sent to greet him at the demarkation line.

It was a bitterly cold, pitch-black night and Abetz was an hour and a half late. Du Moulin fell into a ditch and covered himself with mud and bruises. When Abetz arrived in a convoy of six vehicles with blacked-out headlights, it became apparent that his imposing escort was not diplomatic but military. The sub-machine-guns of a party of S.S. men poked out from under the awnings of two of the trucks.

Abetz, accompanied by Achenbach and wearing his official light-green uniform with enormous white lapels, saluted the two Frenchmen but did not offer to shake hands. When Laure, with a glance at the bodyguard, said: 'We could have taken the responsibility for your protection, Monsieur l'Ambassadeur,' Abetz snapped back: 'With the prevailing habits at Vichy, General, it was very necessary for us to assume the responsibility ourselves.' The German convoy set off at a brisk pace for Vichy,

where Abetz went straight to the rooms that had been reserved for him at the Hôtel Majestic.

Laure tried to accompany him upstairs but was roughly hustled out of the lift by the S.S. men. He went dolefully back to the Hôtel du Parc where Pétain, looking very nervous and tired, was consulting with Baudouin, Bouthillier and Fernet, asking their advice on how he should deal with Abetz.

The interview the following morning began in icy correctness on both sides. The Marshal had taken the precaution of sending a message to the *Garde Mobile* at Chateldon, ordering Laval's release. When Abetz and Achenbach met Pétain and Darlan in the large salon at the Pavillon Sévigné, the Marshal assured Abetz that he had known nothing of Laval's arrest. 'As soon as I heard of it, I countermanded it.'

Abetz replied that he was surprised to find that Laval was not present at the meeting; the Marshal sent Du Moulin to Chateldon to fetch him. Abetz put his demands to the Marshal: that Laval should be brought back into the Government and given, if not the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, at least the Ministry of the Interior. He would accept that Darlan, who had impressed him with his hatred of the English and his attitude during their talks in Paris, should take Laval's place as Vice-President of the Council and be the head of the Directory, which he suggested should be composed of Laval, Flandin and Huntziger.

Du Moulin found Laval in the library of the château, angry and suspicious. He had spent a nerve-racking three days, cut off from the outside world, the telephone disconnected and all visitors forbidden. Three policemen slept at his bedroom door and the building was surrounded by others at three-pace intervals. Mme Laval and Josée were forbidden even to exercise the dogs in the grounds and the only news that filtered into the house was through the wireless.

A battalion of the *Garde Mobile* was stationed in the village and the day before had been ordered to resist by force any attempt that Abetz might make to rescue their prisoner. Laval regarded with deep distrust the information that he was released from arrest and later claimed that he had learned of a plot to shoot him 'while trying to escape' that evening when the guard was changed.

As Du Moulin entered the library, Laval looked at him and growled: 'What have you come for?' Du Moulin said that the Marshal wished him to come to the Pavillon Sévigné. Laval followed Du Moulin out and down to the bottom of the steep approach to the château, where they got into the car that was flying the Marshal's pennant.

'You've done a bloody fine thing!' Laval burst out. 'Arresting me, chucking me into clink, interning me in my own home, in my own village! It was Alibert who fixed it, wasn't it?' Du Moulin said that Alibert had perhaps got a little excited, but he had thought that Laval wanted to make off with the Marshal.

'And it was Flandin,' Laval continued. 'That long streak of nothing. He wanted my job; he had his eye on it a week ago, during his last visit. He set it up with the Marshal. And all this in front of the Germans, the people who can wring our necks if they want to, who can reduce our villages to ashes. Very clever! It's like kids playing – vicious kids! And the Marshal leads the dance. It's horrifying!'

His resentment welled up again. 'I saved the game for him in the National Assembly. Without me he would have made a complete fool of himself. As for Peyrouton, I'll break him, do you hear? And I shan't make any mistakes about it. The cow! He came and called on me that evening. I've seen plenty of things in my life, but I've never seen filth like that. All the Socialists of Aubervilliers, the Communists, the junk men, the street-corner boys, they're all great gentlemen compared with your dung-hills!'

He was still fuming when he got out of the car at the Pavillon Sévigné and stumped through the large salon into the smaller room behind it where the Marshal had his office. Colonel Gorostazu, one of Pétain's staff officers, sidled up to Du Moulin and whispered in his ear that the Marshal wanted them to listen at the door.

Pétain offered Laval his hand and Laval, taking it, said with bitter sarcasm: 'I thank you on my own behalf, Marshal. And I am charged by my wife and daughter to thank you for everything you have done for us.'

A look of injured dignity spread over Pétain's smooth pink cheeks. 'Me? I know nothing at all. I didn't know that you had been arrested.'

This broke the barrier of Laval's self-restraint once more. 'You chucked me out of the door like a lackey. You had the members of my staff arrested. What's the complaint against me? Disagreement on internal policy, as you said in your broadcast? You know very well that's a lie. We have never disagreed; not even over the choice of a single prefect...'

The Marshal continued to protest, but Laval refused to let him get a word in and continued to shout: 'You hold my foreign policy against me: the policy of Montoire. Yet you went to Montoire voluntarily. You were free to stay away. You said to me yourself that it was in the interest of France. The interest of France is to reach an understanding with her conqueror, in honour and dignity. But you don't give a damn for honour and dignity. You're a puppet, a figurehead, a weathercock twirling in every breeze!'

The Marshal remained silent. Darlan struggled to conceal his satisfaction. Abetz, realising that Laval's outburst was providing Pétain with an excellent excuse for not readmitting him to the Cabinet, tried to lower the tone of the conversation by dwelling on Hitler's astonishment and disapproval.

'We are acting on precise instructions,' he said, motioning towards Achenbach. 'Monsieur Laval must resume his place or France will suffer the consequences of an action which you have no doubt not desired, which you have not foreseen, which has been imposed on you by a group of soldiers and anglophiles.' Pétain answered that he had no objection to taking Laval back into the Cabinet, but he could not offer him the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, since this had already been given to Flandin. Perhaps the Ministry of Labour?

Laval burst out again: 'And what should I look like tomorrow, when the whole of France knows that I've been arrested by you, brought back with my feet in chains, and I've accepted a two-penny-ha'penny post with no political significance? Give Flandin the Ministry of Finance: that's what he had in my Cabinet in 1931.'

The argument went on, the voices rising and falling and sometimes inaudible to the eavesdroppers outside. Darlan suggested that it was nearly lunchtime and the talks should be resumed later. As they came out of the small salon, Laval proposed to Abetz that they should go to the floor above for a private talk: he wanted to find out the precise German reaction to the Vichy earthquake. As they moved up the stairs, Pétain gave a sign to Du Moulin and Gorostarzu to follow them.

Laval and Abetz had disappeared when the two eavesdroppers arrived on the next floor. An attendant cautiously nodded his head towards one of the rooms and Du Moulin and Gorostarzu opened the next door along the corridor. They found General Brécard and his wife already there, with their ears glued to the communicating door.

'What do you want?' Mme Brécard asked in a loud voice that sent shivers up their spines. Gorostarzu put his finger to his lips and indicated that he wanted Mme Brécard to move over so that he could apply his own ear to the door.

'But what about us?' Mme Brécard shouted indignantly. As she moved away, she added: 'You can't hear anything, anyway.' It was true. The door was padded on the other side.

The Marshal was melancholy when he met Baudouin at the luncheon table in the Hôtel du Parc. 'We've done some bad work these last few days,' he said. He complained of the outrageous way in which Laval had spoken to him, and said that he was willing to accept Abetz's demand that Darlan should be made Vice-President of the Council. But Abetz himself, when he arrived, seemed inclined to drop his championship of Laval and devoted himself to singing Darlan's praises. The Marshal began to think the trouble was over.

After his nap, his worries began again. He learned that Abetz intended to visit Laval, who had gone back to lunch at Chateldon. He sent for Du Moulin and told him to go round to the Hôtel Majestic and inform Abetz that the Marshal wished to pay him the courtesy of sending a member of his staff with him to Chateldon. Abetz accepted and they set off along the frosty roads in the twilight.

A few of the *Garde Mobile* and many villagers had gathered in

the little square. At the top of the slope leading to the château, Laval was waiting for them, dressed in knickerbockers and heavy shoes, with a samoyed on each side of him: already the picture of the retired politician. He shook Abetz's hand and said: 'You are real friends. You have come to see a friend in distress. I shall never forget your gesture.'

He did not yet realise how far Abetz was fooling him. Laval's dismissal had been taken as a deliberate insult by Hitler and Abetz was perfectly honest in saying so; but his insistence on Laval's return had been largely for his own purposes. Neither Hitler nor Ribbentrop had any great faith in Laval: Hitler called him 'a dirty little politico' and said there was nothing to choose between Laval, Pétain, Weygand and de Gaulle. But Abetz had feared that unless he could get Laval reinstated quickly the channel from Vichy through the Armistice Commission would be reopened and his own position weakened. Fortunately, he believed, he had now found an excellent substitute for Laval in Darlan.

Laval caught sight of Du Moulin and asked him what he was doing there. 'The Marshal asked me to accompany Herr Abetz as far as Chateldon, Monsieur le Président,' he replied. 'And I know you well enough to be sure that you won't refuse me the cup of tea that is waiting for these gentlemen.' Laval grunted: 'Come in then.' He took his visitors on a tour of the château, pointing out the inscription over the fireplace that recorded the chasing away of the English: 'Even then!' he said.

Tea was set out in the dining-room. Mme Laval and Josée were there to do the honours, neither of them very successful in hiding their dislike of the visitors. Du Moulin raised his genteel eyebrows when Laval offered cigars with the tea, and pursed his lips thoughtfully when Laval took Abetz into another room for a quarter of an hour's conversation in private.

Out of earshot of Du Moulin, Abetz told Laval that he was convinced there was a plot to assassinate him and that he must return to Paris with the Germans. Later that evening Vichy was scandalised to see Laval dining in the Chantecler restaurant with Germans in uniform; later still, Du Moulin and Laure stood once more at the demarkation line at Moulins and watched the German

convoy disappear northwards, this time a convoy of seven vehicles, with Laval's car in the middle.

Baudouin wrote in his diary: 'I am deeply uneasy. Until last Friday, the negotiator between France and Germany was Pierre Laval. He was not designated by the Marshal; he named himself. Henceforward, it will be Admiral Darlan, and he has been designated by Germany. Certainly I do not cast doubt on the Admiral's patriotism. But will he be as skilful as Laval? Will he know how to bargain? Will France gain from the operation of 13 December? We are still in the dark. The Admiral's personality does not promote confidence. He is not very intelligent, idle, and completely lacking in frankness. . . .'

It was perhaps a little late in the day for Baudouin to wonder about the wisdom of the 'operation of 13 December', but there was no doubt that it had been received with delight in Britain and the United States. At the end of the year Churchill was writing a personal letter to Pétain, Roosevelt was sending enthusiastic comments to Admiral Leahy, then on his way to take up his post as American Ambassador to Vichy, and *The Times* was referring to the Marshal's 'bold and striking action', and the 'sense of honour and native obstinacy' of this 'dignified but isolated figure'.

It seemed as if Satan had been exorcised and France would now rejoin the Allied cause.

THE ADMIRAL ON THE QUARTER DECK

[1]

ABETZ, ALTHOUGH WORRIED at having lost his highly-placed contact at Vichy, had arrived at the same appreciation of the situation as Baudouin: the basis of the relationship between the German Embassy and the Hôtel du Parc had radically changed. Instead of having to negotiate with Laval, Abetz would now be able to dictate to his successor, provided he could drive Vichy back into negotiating through diplomatic channels.

With this in mind he said at the end of the long report that he telegraphed to Berlin on 18 December: 'One may say that the governmental crisis provoked on 13 December permits us to make direct intervention in French policy. For this purpose, every means of pressure in the hands of the German occupation authorities in Paris and of the Armistice Commission at Wiesbaden should be used without any hesitation during the weeks to come, to demonstrate to the foolhardy men of 13 December what an indescribable stupidity they have committed.'

The pressure was applied immediately. On the night of 17 December Bouthillier set out for Paris by train from Vichy. Shortly after one o'clock in the morning, the train halted at the demarkation line and the Germans boarded it to inspect passes. Bouthillier who, like the other 'débutants', was very proud of the title that he had never expected to possess,

threw out his chest and announced grandly: 'Minister!' 'Minister?' repeated the German. 'Minister of the Vichy Government?'

Bouthillier nodded gravely.

"*Raus!*" shouted the German, hustling him out on to the icy platform and throwing his baggage after him.

The following day Baudouin, whom Abetz had invited, perhaps with malicious intent, to have lunch with him in Paris, was informed that his application for a pass had been refused and that no members of the Government would be allowed to cross the line. All negotiations on the release of prisoners or the supply of extra comforts to them were blocked. Abetz sent a stream of visitors and messages to Vichy, warning of the dreadful things that were about to befall.

The Marshal promptly agreed to the suppression of the *Groupes de Protection* which had played a large part in Laval's arrest; to the replacement of General de la Laurencie by de Brinon; and to the dismissal of Alibert. On the question of Laval's reinstatement his flagging determination was reinforced by Flandin's refusal to accept Laval in any post in the Government. The Marshal began to wonder whether he had made a grave mistake in accepting Flandin as a substitute: the man had his own ideas and was a trouble-maker.

But Flandin, though an old parliamentary hand, was a child at this new game of palace politics. On 22 December Pétain was shaken by a violent letter from Ribbentrop, asking why Laval had not been reinstated. On Christmas Eve Flandin was confronted with the information that, without his knowledge, the Marshal had agreed to Darlan going to see Hitler in an attempt to patch things up.

It was not a very comfortable Christmas Day for the Admiral, though it was a rewarding one. The meeting-place was a few miles south-west of Beauvais, again close to a protective railway tunnel, at the little station that served the villages of La Boissière and Le Déluge, and distinctly closer to the latter. The pilot car lost its way and Darlan was three-quarters of an hour late when he clambered into the Führer's drawing-room car. 'I've never given any of my officers such a choking-off as I got that day,' he

said. 'And even then the interpreter can have passed on only part of the abuse from that madman Hitler.'

His ruddy face became ruddier as Hitler's voice rose and roughened. The two letters that he had brought from Pétain, thanking Hitler for the return of the Duc de Reichstadt's ashes and explaining why he had got rid of Laval ('I am a simple soldier, unfamiliar with the ruses of politicians'), served only as fuel for the flames.

Darlan attempted to explain why Laval had been dismissed, but Hitler interrupted him. It was of no interest to Germany to know what Ministers constituted the French Government; but if Laval was so undesirable it showed very little tact to have allowed the Führer to meet him at Montoire. In any case he did not accept Pétain's excuse that Laval had been dismissed for reasons of internal policy.

Though the manner was rough, the content was comforting for Darlan. It soon became evident that Hitler was not going to insist on Laval's return. Darlan assured him that he was himself a wholehearted believer in the policy of collaboration and was always preaching it to his officers. That was why he had placed the fleet under the Marshal's orders at the time of the armistice instead of heading with it to America, as he could have done.

As Darlan continued, Hitler's interest increased. Here was a much easier opponent than Laval: a man who grovelled for favours instead of pretending to confer them. Abetz was equally pleased with the performance of his new protégé: the more so when Darlan, having assured Hitler that he had no ill-feeling towards Laval and had always worked on the best of terms with him, added that he would like to say with what pleasure the French Government had always collaborated with Herr Abetz.

He had to confess that, in the present situation, Laval's return to the Government would gravely compromise the policy of collaboration; in the interest of France, Laval would have to remain in the background, at any rate for a time. It was Darlan's personal conviction that France's welfare lay in collaboration with Germany. Consequently he would very respectfully beg that Germany should be so kind as to continue to collaborate with France.

After this hearty meal of humble pie, the Admiral returned to Vichy, where he reported that nothing much had happened: 'I made this journey for a twenty minutes' talk which settled nothing and provided for nothing. I heard an explosion of bad temper.'

For four or five weeks this seemed to be true. The Germans kept up the pressure and Abetz mobilised the Paris Press against Vichy. He was not yet certain that Flandin would be got rid of and Darlan given sufficient power to become a suitable negotiator.

Flandin was dealt with by being completely ignored. On 28 December he sent the usual New Year greetings to Berlin through de Brinon, telling him to 'transmit through Herr Abetz the Marshal's good wishes to the Führer on the occasion of the New Year and join with them my personal greetings to Herr Ribbentrop.' Two days later, the reply came: 'The Führer has been very touched by the Marshal's greetings and thanks him for them. As for Monsieur Flandin's message, no reply is called for.'

The Marshal was gloomy. Baudouin reported to him that a friend had had dinner with Laval on New Year's Eve and Laval had been most despondent, saying that he saw only two possibilities: either the Germans would permanently seal the demarkation line and set up a Government of their own choice in the occupied zone, or they would say to Pétain: 'You have agreed to collaborate, so we will collaborate wholly'; and that would mean military collaboration. The Marshal commented that there was a third possibility: 'The Germans would appoint Darlan in my place, for they love Darlan up to the point of embracing him and his ironclads.'

The following day Baudouin resigned. He said to the Marshal: 'I must choose between the straight and the tortuous path I should be obliged to follow if I remained in the Government. My choice is made. I follow the straight path.'

The Marshal got up and put his arm round him. Tears came to Pétain's eyes and, as he shook Baudouin's hand at the door, he said: 'Pity me. You are going, but I, at eighty-four, must stay and lead this sort of life.' Baudouin bowed but did not answer.

Laval took no overt part in the Press campaign that Abetz had organised, and he had no communication with Berlin after writing a note of thanks to Hitler on 20 December, in which he

said: 'The French Government has committed a grave error by this action, but I hope with all my heart that my country will not be made to suffer for it. . . . The policy of collaboration is approved by the great majority of Frenchmen. . . . Collaboration should be honest, without ambiguity and without reservation. It is in this sense that I understand it and have always practised it. . . .

'I love my country and know that it can find a place worthy of its past in the New Europe which you are constructing. I think I can conclude from your attitude that you have faith in the sincerity of my efforts. You are as little mistaken in this as I am myself unaware of the magnanimity and grandeur which you have shown in offering France collaboration on the morrow of your victory.'

The reference to honest, unambiguous and unreserved collaboration, which sounds remarkably false in the light of his later attempts to fool the Germans, was probably a sincere expression of his intentions at this time. He was emotionally unbalanced by the conviction that Germany would win the war, despair that France had lost her chance to keep on friendly terms with the victor, and rage at his own dismissal. In this he was far more vulnerable and blind than the Marshal who, far from being the senile old weathercock that Laval had called him, was an extremely shrewd tactician with a built-in gyroscope. His stabilising mechanism enabled him to make precise and imperceptible adjustments – the famous 'hesitations of the Marshal' – which kept him continually upright and in the same position. It was only when a rare combination of events seemed to threaten this position that he took drastic action, as on 13 December.

Laval's rage, which was directed not only against Pétain's ingratitude and double-dealing but also against himself ('Fooled like a choirboy,' he growled bitterly as he left Chateldon on 17 December), was beginning to subside. It was in the interest of both that the quarrel should be patched up. Pétain did not wish to be presented to the Germans as Laval's enemy. Laval must resume some link with Vichy for fear of becoming dependent on the extreme pro-Nazis in Paris.

On 8 January Laval was approached by Jacques Benoist-Méchin, one of the milder pro-Nazis who had been appointed to

look after the interests of French prisoners of war and had had the misfortune to arrive in Berlin the day after 13 December and had found all doors slammed in his face. Returning to Paris, where he was alarmed by threats from Abetz and forebodings from de Brinon, he called on Laval to see if there were any chance of arriving at a reconciliation. Laval said he had no intention of returning to 'the cut-throats' of Vichy.

Benoist-Méchin travelled down to Vichy with a pass that de Brinon had got for him, and talked first with Darlan. The Admiral assured him that he had known nothing of the plot to arrest Laval, had been at the pictures when it happened, and had not heard about it until the following morning. He wanted to know whether the Germans were determined to have Laval back. Which did they want: the man or the policy? Benoist-Méchin told him that he believed that the Germans had had no particular interest in Laval before 13 December, but he might now have become some sort of symbol for them.

He had lunch with the Marshal, who asked the same question as Darlan. He added: 'I was perhaps wrong in getting rid of Monsieur Laval in the way that I did. But he had become impossible. And it would be even more impossible to take him back at the moment, since he was extremely rude to me. I should appear to be bowing before a German *diktat*. My prestige would be gravely injured.'

The following afternoon the Directory – Darlan, Flandin and Huntziger, under the presidency of the Marshal – drew up an aide-mémoire for Benoist-Méchin to give to Abetz. This said that Laval would be taken back into the Government as soon as the reform of French institutions and the establishment of the new French State had been accomplished; but not as successor to the Marshal nor as Minister of the Interior. Laval's recall would be dependent on his sending a personal letter of apology to Pétain; on the Germans' giving permission for the Marshal to make tours in the occupied zone; and on the suppression of the attacks by the Paris Press on the Marshal and his Government.

Benoist-Méchin returned to Paris, handed the note to Abetz and then went to ask Laval whether he would be prepared to apologise to the Marshal. Laval flew into a temper and replied

that it was the Marshal's duty to offer apologies. After considerable argument he agreed to think about it. Three days later he asked Benoist-Méchin to call in at his office.

Laval was even-tempered and affable. He produced the letter that he had written and insisted on reading it to Benoist-Méchin, who listened with mounting astonishment.

'I readily admit, Monsieur le Maréchal, that at our last interview I expressed my feelings freely and with little consideration for the exigencies of protocol. But this gave me such relief, after the treatment that I had received during the preceding days, that I could not, without lying, say that I feel the slightest regret for it. At Bordeaux I spoke even more strongly to President Lebrun and he did not take it amiss even though he, too, was Head of the State. He knew that I was right. You yourself, Monsieur le Maréchal, were not shocked, perhaps because at that time my demands conformed with your own wishes——'

Benoist-Méchin interrupted to protest that, if that was the sort of thing Laval was going to say, it would be better for him not to write any letter at all, and certainly not to expect Benoist-Méchin to take it to the Marshal. Laval gave him a malicious grin and said: 'All right, don't get worked up about it. I got a lot of relief out of writing it and reading it to you. I'll draw up another one.'

The second letter was not very much closer to an apology but Benoist-Méchin, seeing that Laval was not prepared to compromise further, set off to Vichy with it, spending three hours in the cold at Moulins, arguing with a German N.C.O. who wanted to search his brief-case, while the train went on without him. Exhausted and far from confident, he was shown into the Marshal's office at 10.15 on 16 January.

Pétain took the letter and asked Benoist-Méchin if it was indeed a letter of apology. Benoist-Méchin assured him that it was. The Marshal scanned the first two lines, then folded the letter and put it in the drawer of his desk. 'I would rather not read it through to the end,' he said. 'It would be a nuisance if I came across something unacceptable.' Later that day he sent Darlan to tell Benoist-Méchin that he would meet Laval at Varennes-sur-Allier on the 18th.

Although a meeting between Laval and Pétain had been

accepted in principle at the meeting of the Directory, the Marshal knew that his Ministers did not expect it to occur for some time and that there would be opposition to it. On 17 January he sent a message to Laval that the rendezvous was to be at La Ferté-Hauterive, one station farther up the line from Vichy. After lunch on the 18th he set out with Du Moulin, as if for one of his usual afternoon drives. They drove two or three miles northward and stopped at Rhue, just beyond the airfield and rubbish dump, where the Marshal's train was waiting at the level crossing. Hoisted on the shoulders of two *gardes mobiles*, Pétain clambered into the train, followed by Du Moulin, and twenty minutes later they arrived at La Ferté-Hauterive.

Laval, who had hesitated before coming because he feared he might be arrested again, was waiting on the station platform. He got into the Marshal's drawing-room car and the train was shunted into a siding. The two principals settled into armchairs while Du Moulin hovered in the background.

Laval opened the conversation by saying that he regretted his extreme language to the Marshal, but that he had been the victim of an abominable plot and wanted, if not amends, at least an explanation. He listed the accusations that had been made against him, but the Marshal did not reply.

'Why, then, did you have me arrested?' Laval pursued.

'Because you did not keep me informed,' Pétain replied.

'I did nothing else, for five months.'

'Oh, you informed me in passing, on the run, once in ten times. You merely told me what you wanted me to know, and the proof is that you never left any written reports with me.'

'That's not my fault,' said Laval. 'I'm a politician. I'm not a soldier. I've never made reports. Besides, any that I put on your table would have been passed on within twenty-four hours to Churchill, de Gaulle and the British agent Rougier.'

The Marshal blinked uncomfortably. He had no idea that Laval had discovered his secret dealings with Rougier. But when Laval warned him against Flandin and other members of his Cabinet and staff he defended them energetically.

'I don't say that I've always treated you correctly,' Laval

continued. 'I don't even say that I haven't sometimes been lacking in psychology. But you must realise that the atmosphere was entirely new to me. I'm not used to military men. Even so, you will not forget that in the National Assembly——'

'I know,' said the Marshal. 'You have rendered me great services. But that does not prevent——'

Laval interrupted him. 'Why argue, Marshal, since we share the same opinions on many things and many people? Since there is no basic difference, I don't see why we shouldn't profit from the occasion to agree on something concrete – for instance, a brief communiqué, a statement to the Press.'

'Well, there's an idea,' said the Marshal. Du Moulin came forward to protest: 'You told me a little while ago, Marshal, that this interview was to be unofficial and that you would give nothing to the newspapers.'

Laval glared at him. 'What's that to do with you, Du Moulin? You're here to take notes, not to interrupt us.'

Pétain, delighted that Laval was not pressing to be taken back, and seeing in the statement an opportunity to impress the Germans with his good intentions, added his own reproof: 'Monsieur Laval is right. We're both of age. There's no need for you to tell us what to do. You'd be better employed in helping me to draw up the statement.'

'No need to give yourself that trouble,' said Laval. 'I've got it in my pocket.' He pulled out a crumpled sheet of paper with a few lines scribbled on it and read: 'Marshal Pétain and Président Laval have met at the station of La Ferté-Hauterive. They established that there was no serious disagreement between them. They parted.'

The Marshal, who fancied his skill in choosing words, suggested that 'misunderstanding' should be substituted for 'disagreement', and then approved the statement being issued to the Press in a slightly extended form: 'Marshal Pétain, Head of State, has met Président Laval. They had a long conversation in the course of which they dispelled the misunderstandings which led to the events of 13 December.'

Laval got into his car to drive back to Paris and the other two returned to Vichy, where Du Moulin went straight to Flandin

and told him of the interview and the statement. Flandin immediately summoned the foreign journalists to his office and told them to disregard any communiqué which Laval might issue. He assured them that he had Du Moulin's notes of the meeting and that the Marshal was irrevocably determined not to recall Laval. He ordered the censorship to be lifted so that the Swiss, British and American newspapers could be informed.

Abetz's reaction was immediate. The demarkation line was closed to all Frenchmen between the ages of eighteen and forty-five. The Marshal ignored Flandin at Cabinet meetings and encouraged Darlan to plead for an interview with Abetz, thus supplanting Flandin as Foreign Minister.

On 2 February Ribbentrop gave permission for Darlan to visit Abetz, and added that Laval was not to be permitted to return to the unoccupied zone. A fortnight earlier he had told Abetz to warn Laval that there was a plot to assassinate him, and he should not go near Vichy. Abetz, who was far from stupid, realised which way the wind was blowing. When Darlan told him that he had offered Laval a place in the Government but that Laval had made impossibly high demands, Abetz answered: 'Do you think we place all that importance on Laval? You could have chucked him in the Allier, for all we care.'

When Abetz reported to Ribbentrop that Darlan had made an approach to Laval, he received a further order that Laval was to be kept in the occupied zone and that 'the Laval affair shall be handled in such a way that there shall for the moment be no understanding between Laval and Vichy'. The Führer had indeed been impressed with the possibilities of dealing with Darlan instead of Laval. As Achenbach said later: 'When you ask Laval for a chicken, he gives you an egg and a smile; when you ask Darlan for an egg, he gives you the chicken.'

On 8 February Darlan reported to the Council of Ministers on his talks in Paris. 'The moment is as grave as that in which we had to decide to ask for an armistice. If we renounce collaboration, we shall lose the advantages which we hoped to gain from that armistice. My choice is made. I am for collaboration.'

On 9 February Flandin handed in his resignation. The following day, in a third amendment to Constitutional Act No. 4,

Darlan was named as the Marshal's successor and as Vice-President of the Council – to the amazement of Admiral Leahy, the American Ambassador, who noted that 'I had distinct impressions from conversation with the Marshal that he did not have full confidence in the Admiral'. Darlan, in addition to the Vice-Presidency, gave himself the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Interior and Information. He had successfully spiked the guns of Weygand, Laval and Flandin; he had accumulated a battery that no rival seemed likely to be able to stand against.

[2]

DARLAN BELIEVED THAT German victory would bring him either the Marshal's crown or the title of Admiral of Europe, which Abetz had hinted at and which he may have thought was also in the Führer's mind. He had neither policy nor political skill, but a lifetime's dexterity in career-building. 'Admiral Darlan is celebrated throughout the navy,' said Fernet, 'for the fervour that he has always devoted to chewing off the finger-nails of those around him who could do him any harm.' For fourteen months he steered the French ship of State through dangerous rapids with the frenzied inconsequence of a one-armed man in a coracle.

Posing as a blunt, simple fellow and affecting a forthright and often coarse mode of speech, he was avid for luxury and display. His personal train, equipped with two bathrooms, was the most well-appointed in Vichy, and caused the greatest upheavals on the railway by its unannounced arrivals and departures. A twenty-four-piece naval orchestra accompanied him on all his journeys. His passion for decorations led him to chase after the most insignificant orders, civilian as well as military. When he finally quit as head of the Government, he demanded the title of Commander-in-Chief, with the right to add more stars, stripes and rings to his uniforms. ('Stick 'em all over his backside, if he wants,' said Laval.)

For most of his time in office Darlan had good reason to believe in the victory of Germany. Wavell's offensive against the Italians in Libya had come to a halt in February. The Italians continued to meet disaster at sea in the Mediterranean and on land in Abyssinia, but the Germans raced through Yugoslavia and Greece, sweeping the British from the mainland and then from Crete. To Britain, fighting alone, Roosevelt's Lease-Lend Bill in March brought only the promise of limited aid; the German onslaught on Russia, which began in June, was triumphant until the winter set in. In December Japan entered the war with a series of staggering victories against Britain and the United States.

The Marshal left the conduct of external affairs to Darlan – who presented such excellent, well-ordered reports – and busied himself with the 'National Revolution' which was to consolidate his position. A National Council to replace the National Assembly, with members appointed directly or indirectly from above and then split into small, manageable groups, was instituted in January. The oath of allegiance to the Marshal was imposed first on Ministers and senior civil servants, then on the army, the magistrature and everybody holding public office.

He worked on his Labour Charter, an uneasy blend of corporatism and trade unionism. He continued with the suppression of secret societies and political parties. He set up commissars to crush opposition to the 'National Revolution' and a Political Council of Justice to act as his private Star Chamber. He formed the *Service d'Ordre Légionnaire*, which was later to develop into the Militia and be to the *Légion Française des Combattants* what the S.S. was to the Brown Shirts, sworn to 'fight against democracy, against Gaullist dissidence, and against the Jewish plague'.

Large portraits of the Marshal soon became obligatory in shop windows and public places, and the organised adulation in the Press of the unoccupied zone was sometimes indistinguishable from blasphemy:

'Our Father which art at our head,
Hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done
On earth that we may live.
Remain our daily bread
Without return.
Give back its life to France.
Let us not fall
Into idle dreams or lies
And deliver us from evil,
O Marshal!

While the Marshal tightened his grip on France, Darlan tried to resume contact with the Germans. He was confronted with the same problem that Laval had faced when he came to power, but with the difference that the Germans, made suspicious by the events of 13 December, were even more cautious about collaboration and determined to drive a hard bargain before they even pretended to put it into operation. They increased their demands for war material, but kept the demarkation line firmly closed. They were occupied with their new moves in Libya and Greece and with plans for their attack on Russia. It was in their interest to let France sweat and starve.

At the beginning of May Darlan suddenly found himself being courted by the Germans. A German-inspired revolt had broken out in Iraq, threatening the British bases there and promising, the Germans hopefully thought, to develop into a general rising against the British throughout the Moslem world. In Egypt Rommel had advanced to Sollum. Athens was in German hands. They now needed Syria as a staging base to pour arms and reinforcements into Iraq.

Abetz called Darlan to Paris and told him that, if he would help the Germans in Syria, the Führer might make concessions on the demarkation line, the occupation charges, and the return of prisoners to work in mines and factories. Darlan leaped at the offer and, on 6 May, approved an agreement under which France was to send her own weapons and aircraft from Syria to Iraq; to help transport supplies; to put Aleppo airfield at the disposal of German aircraft and to provide fuel and maintenance; to hand

over all information about the disposition of British forces; and to send French officers to Iraq to instruct in the use of French weapons. On 9 May the first German airplanes landed at Aleppo. On 11 May Darlan arrived at Berchtesgaden for talks with Hitler and Ribbentrop.

In one bound he had taken the step that Pétain and Laval had managed to hold back from – military collaboration with Germany. He had the right to expect a warm welcome. He was sadly disappointed. Hitler, his temper not improved by the disappearance of Rudolf Hess the day before, flying to Scotland with his own peace proposals, had taken Darlan's measure. In his roughest browbeating manner he harped on 13 December and his lack of faith in Vichy's good intentions. It was no good France asking for concessions now; henceforward she must make good her promises before there was any question of Germany offering anything in repayment.

Darlan pointed out that their meeting was on the feast day of another great fighter against the British: Saint Joan. France was showing proof of her sincerity by the aid she was providing in Syria. 'France is completely prepared to help Germany win the war.' On his return to Vichy he urged the Council of Ministers that this was their last chance to save the situation. He went to the microphone to rally public opinion to the idea of military collaboration.

'If the impossible happened and there were a British victory, Paris would be no more than a cemetery. . . . In a triumphant Anglo-Saxon world France would be only a second-class dominion. . . . This is a choice between life and death. The Marshal and the Government have chosen life.'

The Marshal was none too pleased at being included in the speech. He told Admiral Leahy that he did not know what Darlan was up to and could only assure him that there would be no 'voluntary' military aid to Germany.

Pétain's nervousness increased when Darlan went to Paris again and drew up a series of agreements with General Warlimont under which, in return for unspecified concessions, France would give Germany the use of the port of Bizerta to supply Rommel in Egypt; the use of the Bizerta-Gabès railway;

the right to buy trucks and guns from French North African stocks; and the right to install a German submarine base at Dakar. With German submarines operating in the Atlantic from a French African base, Vichy would soon find itself in trouble with the Americans.

Darlan's agreement with Warlimont required the Marshal's signature and the Marshal was now in the unhappy position of being told what Darlan was up to and of having to do something about it. He didn't want to sign, and he didn't want to refuse to sign: one would queer his pitch with the Americans, the other would lead to a violent reaction from Hitler, possibly even to the installation of a *gauleiter* who would turn Pétain out of his job, a bogey that was beginning to haunt him more and more. He hit upon the neat solution of calling Weygand from Algiers for consultations, certain before the General arrived that he would oppose the suggested agreement and thus take most of the blame on his own shoulders.

When Weygand arrived, the Marshal had a private talk with him, telling him that he believed things were going too far. At the Council of Ministers the fierce little General vigorously expounded his view that 'we must not only refuse military collaboration' but must also avoid being lured into 'a military collaboration which is not explicitly agreed but which is in danger of becoming almost inevitable because of the acts of provocation which are now being decided upon'. He threatened to resign if the Germans or Italians were given any military facilities in French North Africa.

As soon as Weygand had left the room, Pétain assured the Ministers that he fully supported Darlan, but that, since the project was the subject of criticism, he would be glad to hear the others' opinion on it. This unusual departure from his practice of telling his Ministers of decisions taken instead of asking for their views gave Huntziger and Bergeret the opportunity to state that neither the army nor the air force was in a position to fight the British. Chevalier, who still hoped to come to an agreement with Halifax, came out openly against the proposals and underlined the serious effect that Weygand's retirement would have on public opinion.

Pétain had thus provided himself with useful cover. He knew that Council meetings in Vichy were as little secret as if they had been held in the Rue de Lille, where reports on all of them reached Abetz through de Brinon or other unidentified members of the Government or secretariats. The Germans would know that Weygand had led the opposition to the plan; that Pétain had tried to uphold it but had met with opposition from other Ministers. There remained the problem of finding a way in which to refuse to ratify without upsetting Hitler.

It was again Weygand who provided the solution at a conference later in the day. Germany's concessions had not been specified. Weygand suggested that France should pitch her demands so high that it would be impossible for the Germans to agree. His suggestion was accepted. When he returned to Algiers on 6 June, Britain had already concluded an armistice with the Iraqis and it seemed as if the danger of France being drawn into the war on Germany's side had been averted.

But Vichy had failed to reckon with de Gaulle, who had organised a force in Palestine and was determined to launch an attack on Syria. Following exactly the same methods as at Dakar, he at first assured the British that his troops would be welcomed with open arms by the Vichy forces and then, having got talks started on this basis, said that there might be some resistance and that he would need British support. He has himself said that he had to drag the British into the campaign and that he feared that they were embarking on a policy of 'appeasement' towards Vichy. He also claimed that the British had sinister designs on Syria and wanted to wrest it away from France, which may well have been true, but was certainly not going to be prevented by urging the British to send their troops there.

Wavell, who had just suffered a defeat in Crete and had to support the campaigns in Abyssinia and Somaliland as well as the main defence in the west against Rommel, was unwilling to spare troops for de Gaulle's venture, but he was over-ruled by Whitehall. On 8 June Maitland Wilson with two divisions of Australian and Indian troops, and Le Gentilhomme with a division of Free French, crossed the border into Syria. The horror of hand-to-hand fighting between Frenchmen had begun.

Six weeks later the Vichy commander asked for an armistice. The Vichy troops were allowed to retain their personal weapons; those who wished to were at liberty to join the Free French forces; the remainder would be repatriated to France. Of twenty thousand men, about ten per cent declared for de Gaulle.

On the face of it, Laval seemed to have accepted his dismissal as final. He received a string of visitors in his office in Paris and at his home at Chateldon, but his only public announcement was at a dinner to journalists late in May. Referring to Darlan's broadcast, claiming that he had at Berchtesgaden saved the integrity of the French Empire, Laval maliciously asked what assurances he had received about the integrity of Alsace-Lorraine and the rest of Metropolitan France. A reporter who called on him at the *Moniteur* offices in the Rue Blatin at Clermont-Ferrand soon after the Syrian war began, found him more relaxed and contented than he had ever seen him before: even his teeth were beginning to look white.

'There's nothing more that I wish for,' Laval said as he checked over the accounts of the printing works. 'The Admiral will have to pay. He thought he was clever, playing against me. Now he is more unpopular than I ever was, particularly in Paris.' His face clouded as he thought of the men in the Hôtel du Parc: 'They must be dreadfully anxious on the Marshal's floor.'

But to his closer associates he confessed that he wanted to get back into the Government before the end of the summer, when he thought the position would have become even more difficult. He had reduced his demands and would be satisfied now with only the Ministry of the Interior (so that he could control the police and make sure that he was not arrested a second time). Darlan had offered him the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which had become much too hot for the Admiral to handle, but Laval had insisted on the Ministry of the Interior. Darlan had replied that he could not withdraw this from Pucheu, who had only recently taken over the Ministry.

Vichy's decision not to ratify the Protocols of Paris until the Germans had agreed to the exorbitant demands suggested by Weygand was communicated to Abetz by Benoist-Méchin on 7 June, but did not produce the tempestuous reaction that had

been feared. This was partly because Hitler was preoccupied with the Russian campaign which, like Napoléon 129 years before, he had begun in the third week of June. But it was also because both Benoist-Méchin and Abetz had toned down the French reply. Each of these middlemen had a strong interest in preventing a serious rupture between the two Governments. Abetz, in a note to the Wilhelmstrasse on 27 June, gave the impression that it was only over Dakar that the French were unwilling to take action, and he pointed out that they had fulfilled their obligations in Syria, involving themselves in battle with the British, without receiving any German concession in return.

The German High Command, however, was determined to continue Rommel's attack in North Africa simultaneously with the major attack against Russia. When they pressed Vichy to implement its promise to open the port of Bizerta, Darlan repeated the reply that he had given Abetz but this time, on 14 July, sent it direct to the Armistice Commission at Wiesbaden.

It arrived in Berlin undiluted. Ribbentrop replied that he refused to take official notice of the communication and would not submit it to the Führer. He told Abetz that all negotiations were to be suspended and that he was held personally responsible for seeing that Ribbentrop's instructions were carried out. Abetz held feverish consultations with de Brinon and Benoist-Méchin and sent placatory explanations of the French problems to Ribbentrop. These merely resulted in his recall to Berlin. Once again there was a complete breakdown in diplomatic relations between France and Germany.

[3]

IN FIVE MONTHS, Darlan had succeeded in destroying sympathy for France on all sides. The Germans suspected that she was trying to take advantage of their commitments on the Russian front, and still maintained forty divisions poised threateningly north of the demarkation line. The British attitude had hardened since the Syrian fighting. On 21 July France admitted Japanese troops into the whole of Indo-China and signed a pact for the

mutual defence of the territory, thus arousing anxiety and distrust in America.

At the end of June Darlan broke off diplomatic relations with Russia. The French Communist Party, which had been driven underground by Daladier and for the past year had supported the Nazis, now switched with admirable discipline to the other side and immediately became the first effective and widespread anti-German sabotage organisation.

On 21 August the Communists killed their first German, a midshipman named Mozer, who was shot on the platform of the Barbès-Rochechouart metro station. The next morning the head of the Paris section of the Ministry of the Interior was summoned to German headquarters and told that Hitler had personally ordered the arrest of 100 Frenchmen and the shooting of fifty of them. Their corpses were to be put on display in the Place de la Concorde as a warning to others. The Germans would, however, refrain from carrying out the shootings if the French themselves set up a special court, with retroactive legislation, to try and condemn to death any six Communists already in prison. Sentence and execution must be carried out before Mozer's burial on 28 August.

Once more the Germans had confronted Vichy with the option of committing one barbaric illegality in order to forestall a greater one. The necessary law was drawn up on 23 August, falsely dated 14 August, and promulgated in the *Journal Officiel* on 24 August. On 25 August a judge was found who was willing to preside over the trial. As he entered the court room, he said to the four magistrates who were to sit with him: 'We have to pronounce six death sentences.'

It was not only Germans who were being assassinated. At the end of July Max Dormoy, a former Popular Front Minister, was killed at his home by a bomb placed there by four members of Jacques Doriot's pro-Nazi *Parti Populaire Français*. On 27 August there was another outbreak of violence: this time at Versailles, where the first contingent of the *Légion des Volontaires Français* had been formed by the pro-Nazi extremists – notably Déat, Doriot and Deloncle – as a Free French Corps to fight against the Russians.

The distinguished guests at the ceremony were headed by Schleier, acting Ambassador in place of Abetz, de Brinon and the Prefect of the Seine. Following them came Déat and Laval, who had at first refused but had been persuaded by Deloncle. The tricolour flag was hoisted; the *Marseillaise* was played for the first time in public in the occupied zone. The guests continued to the cookhouse, where they tasted the soup that was being prepared for the evening meal and then made their way over the cobbles towards the main gate. A young man who had been observing them through one of the barrack-room windows hurried to a point where he could see them as they came through the narrow side-gate, the main doors not having opened.

A moment after the official party emerged, there was the crackle of three shots in succession; a pause, and then two more shots. The colonel commanding the depot received a bullet in his right arm; so did one of the legionnaires; and a woman unaccountably got cut with a knife. Déat, who was also wounded, saw Laval stagger and put his hand to his heart. He tore open Laval's shirt and saw that blood was coming from the left side of his chest.

In the ensuing uproar, during which the assailant, a twenty-one-year-old Norman named Paul Colette, was nearly lynched, Laval, Déat and the other wounded men were taken to the civil hospital at Versailles and the chief medical officer to the garrison, Dr Pierre Barragué, was called to attend to them. In a milling mob of reporters and officials it was an hour before Barragué was able to get an X-ray picture of Laval's injuries.

There was a slight wound in his shoulder. A second bullet had been deflected upwards by his cuff-link – he had, as usual, been carrying his walking-stick on his arm crooked across his body – and had entered the lower left side of his chest, pierced the lung, and lodged within half a centimetre of his heart. He was spitting blood and very close to death.

Laval himself thought he was going to die and began to dictate a sort of political testament, declaring his love of France and his desire to protect her. He was interrupted by a German officer who burst in and announced: 'Monsieur le Président, your assassin has been arrested. We are about to shoot him.'

Laval, who was still lying on a stretcher, shook his head and answered: 'Don't do that.' The German insisted, but Laval again said: 'I beg you not to do that. It would be a grave mistake. You do not know the French reaction as I do.' He spat out more blood and the German officer left.

Laval's wound was infected and for four days his temperature remained above 104 degrees. Since he insisted on supervising every detail of his treatment and had to be propped up in bed where he could see everything that went on, the doctors had to falsify the temperature chart in order not to alarm him. His strong peasant body brought him through, despite a good deal of pain, and by the beginning of September he was eating soup and yoghurt, which provided him with nourishment but little satisfaction, and less than a week later had happily passed on to fish and steaks. He was soon convalescing, walking a little more slowly and leaning a little more heavily on his cane, but in no need of the attentions of Dr Sauerbruch, the eminent German surgeon whose services Hitler had offered as soon as he heard the news.

The attack did much to strengthen Laval's position with the Germans. They assumed that he had almost been martyred on their account, as they believed that it was his devotion to their cause that had brought about his dismissal on 13 December. There was even a slight rise in Laval's popularity in France, particularly since the Marshal, uneasy about the unrest in the country and its effect on his own position, had on 12 August delivered his most openly dictatorial message to date:

'Frenchmen: I have serious things to say to you. For several weeks past I have felt an evil wind arising in many regions of France. Minds have been conquered by uneasiness, doubt has taken possession of souls. The authority of my Government is questioned. Orders are often badly executed. . . . If France does not understand that she is condemned to a change of régime, she will see the abyss open before her in which Spain was nearly engulfed in 1936 and from which she saved herself only by faith, youth and sacrifice.'

Ever since the failure to implement the Paris Protocols Abetz had been agitating for the removal of Weygand from North

Africa, realising that the General would always oppose the renewal of the policy of collaboration on which Abetz's continued existence as ambassador depended. Darlan, who was being freely criticised by the army for his bungling of affairs, supported the attack on his chief rival. Pétain, feeling shaky himself, recalled Weygand in mid-October and told him that he would have to go, offering him a Ministry of State with the job of preparing a constitution for the Empire.

Weygand accepted his dismissal but refused his new post; whereupon Pétain was confronted with a mild mutiny on the part of the *Légion Française des Combattants*, in whose eyes Weygand was almost as sacred a figure as the Marshal. The Committee of the Legion asked for an interview and agreed among themselves on the various points that they would make to him, none of them calculated to be delivered in less than five minutes.

The Marshal had them shown into his office and surveyed them slowly and affectionately with his clear, honest blue eyes.

'You are good Frenchmen?' he asked.

'Yes, Marshal!' they answered proudly.

'Attention!' said the Marshal. 'Stand at ease! Attention! About turn! Dis-miss!'

But there were other Frenchmen and other problems not so easily dealt with. At eight o'clock on the morning of 20 October Lieutenant-Colonel Holz was shot near the cathedral at Nantes. The Germans immediately ordered the shooting of fifty hostages. Sixteen were shot at Nantes on Tuesday the 21st; on Wednesday five were shot in Paris and twenty-seven in the detention camp at Châteaubriant. The Germans ordered that another fifty should be shot within forty-eight hours if Holz's killer had not been found by then.

Once more the Germans managed to implicate the Vichy Government. They submitted a list of fifty hostages to Pucheu, who asked for the removal of the names of forty men who were ex-soldiers. The Germans substituted forty Communists and Pucheu made no further comment. The brilliant businessman was a poor politician: he had allowed the Germans to jockey him into the position of judge if not of executioner.

On the morning after Pétain heard that the executions had

been carried out, he sent for Du Moulin: 'Have you heard the news?' he asked. 'They have shot fifty hostages. We cannot remain here. We are dishonoured. All this blood will fall on us.' He was pale, ill-shaven, his eyes wet with tears. Du Moulin said that they must protest.

'Protest, protest – that's easy,' said Pétain. 'Yes, we shall protest. But that is not enough. We must oppose it. We must stop this killing! I have been thinking about it. I have not closed my eyes all night. I must go to Paris and hand myself over as a prisoner. Henceforward, I shall be the only hostage.'

Du Moulin said he did not think the Germans would accept Pétain as a prisoner or even let him get to Paris; he would probably kick his heels at the demarkation line and catch pneumonia. Pétain insisted on sending for some of his Ministers and putting the idea to them. Bouthillier was in favour; Darlan said nothing; Pucheu advised against it and said that public opinion was not on the side of the killers, who were probably not Frenchmen at all but a collection of Jews, Red Spaniards and Poles. He pointed out that even de Gaulle had condemned the attacks in a wireless broadcast, warning Frenchmen against isolated incidents which would only bring heavy reprisals. Since the killers were not the people who were being shot, the argument had little point, but resulted in a violent row between Pucheu and Du Moulin. Du Moulin flounced out of the room and slammed the door behind him.

Some time later he was again summoned to the Marshal's office. 'And what have you decided?' Du Moulin asked.

'Well,' said Pétain. 'You see I've – how shall I say? – I've had to put off the journey.'

'You've given in?' asked Du Moulin.

'No. Not entirely. I've still got a little escape hatch. But you see, at bottom, Darlan and Romier were against it. One mustn't give way to one's first impulses. My departure might perhaps have had more disadvantages than advantages.' Then, seeing the reproach in Du Moulin's eyes, he added sharply: 'Well, I thought of it. You didn't suggest it to me. It's none of your business.'

Though the Germans were accepting small favours from Darlan – information about British convoys in the Mediterranean,

facilities for their light naval craft to reach the Mediterranean via the Rhône canal – they still granted no concessions and made it clear that they were dissatisfied with what they got. At the end of November Darlan thought he saw a gleam of light. Abetz told him that Göring was ready for a talk with him and the Marshal.

The setting followed the familiar pattern: the private train at a minor railway junction, this time Saint-Florentin-Vergigny, between Auxerre and Troyes. Pétain wore his Verdun uniform and ancient raincoat; Darlan, though he had put on all the brass he could find, was outshone by the dazzle and decorations of Göring, the cinema commissioner to Hitler's bus-inspector, a hard glint in his blue eyes and his marshal's baton in his left hand. ('I keep mine in my trouser pocket,' commented Pétain.)

The Frenchmen knew that the Russians had begun to counter-attack and that Rommel was being driven back in North Africa. They mistakenly assumed that this was a likely time to bargain and Pétain produced many of the demands that the Germans had rejected six months before: the release of prisoners, the abolition of the demarkation line, the reduction of occupation costs.

They met with a smart rebuff. 'Tell me,' said Göring, 'who are the victors – you or us?' He refused to pass Pétain's memorandum on to Hitler or even to accept it himself. Finally Pétain slipped it into Göring's pocket.

Darlan considered that Pétain had been too intransigent, and was more than ever convinced of this when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on 7 December. A few days later he offered to let Rommel's retreating army enter Tunisia and to throw the French North African troops into the battle against the British.

But Rommel managed to halt his retreat and, despite Abetz's plea to Hitler to let the French show how genuine they were in their offers of military collaboration, Hitler decided that any Franco-German alliance in North Africa would cause too much trouble with the Italians. He was also unfavourably impressed by Pétain's New Year's Eve address to the French people.

After attacking as 'deserters' those who opposed him in London and Paris, the Marshal made a plea for sympathy: 'In the partial exile to which I am subjected, in the semi-liberty which remains to me, I try to do all my duty. Every day I try to rescue

this country from the asphyxia which threatens it, from the troubles which lie in wait for it. Help me!’

The speech was recorded and, when he heard what was in it, Darlan made frantic efforts to prevent its being broadcast. He sent for Duvivier, head of the broadcasting services, and ordered him to remove the references to partial exile and semi-liberty. Duvivier protested that there would then be blanks in the speech. ‘I don’t give a damn,’ said Darlan. ‘I don’t want any sodding about. Do as I tell you.’ Duvivier refused and Du Moulin sent him some men to strengthen the guard on the radio station. The message was broadcast as Pétain had recorded it.

From this moment, Darlan was ready to accept a successor, at any rate in civil affairs. If the Marshal was sliding out of his responsibilities, then so would he. Years of military life had made both men hypersensitive to dangers to their reputations and their careers; what was required at the moment was some ill-bred, ungentlemanly outsider to whom neither reputation nor security seemed to have importance. It was the hour of Pierre Laval.

[4]

LAVAL HAD SPENT the autumn convalescing, much of it at his beloved Chateldon. ‘Look at this beautiful country!’ he would exclaim. ‘Isn’t it beautiful, my country? When you see sun like this you can always say to yourself: Laval is at Chateldon.’ He walked around the grounds and up to the farms, surveying the fruit and vegetables, bemoaning the lack of manure now that many of the horses had gone, checking the work at the sawmill and the mineral-bottling works. He prided himself on being able to do any job on the estate better than anybody else, gelding pigs or injecting sheep with the same skill that he could bring to running the machines in the printing works at Clermont-Ferrand.

The village still witnessed the arrivals and departures of unusual guests – the Portuguese Ambassador, the Spanish

Ambassador – but Laval seemed to have settled down to recover from the bullet wound and dismiss from his mind all thoughts of return to power. In October a journalist, Maurice Martin du Gard, found him fresh-faced and smiling, looking more like a man of forty than one approaching sixty. He proudly showed the battered cuff-link, which he superstitiously continued to wear: ‘You see! They can fire at me point-blank. It doesn’t make any difference.’ He was a man sure of his destiny. In any case his astrologer had predicted that he would not come to a violent end.

He picked up his hat and cane and walked down the slope from the château and then right-handed up the village street to show his visitor the sawmill, preceded by the two policemen whom Darlan had sent to protect him, or to keep an eye on him. He talked about Paris and the German troops:

‘“Correct” – they say they’re “correct”. I say they’re intimidated. I foresaw that. Intimidated!’ He beamed with pleasure. ‘It’s not like in Poland – ah, the swine! Or like in Italy. They’re not well liked in Italy. I foresaw that, too. They don’t care; but Mussolini must be fed up with it.’ He went off on his hobby-horse: the crimes of the *idéologues* who had ruined his hope of an alliance with Mussolini to contain Germany six years before.

‘He never wanted anything but to ally himself with us and the English. But there were the *idéologues*! The bastards! Have you seen the changing of the guard in Paris, at the Arc de Triomphe? When I come out of my office in the Champs-Élysées, I see that. It isn’t very funny. It hurts me. And to think that I could have avoided it! Every time I see that guard, I say to myself: “That bastard——! That bastard——!”’ He named the politicians who had been his opponents before the war.

He paused to shake the hand of an old woman who came to thank him – ‘her son was a prisoner’ – and to ask one of the village girls if she would come up the next day and type some correspondence for him. It was the squire leisurely strolling through a village that adored him. ‘They put all the men from Chateldon on farms. I got back the married men with two or three children first; then those who had only one or none at all; now I’m having a go at the bachelors.’ He sighed with delight. ‘Ah, when you

have the luck to be born and work in this beautiful countryside, under this sky, and you can take this beautiful earth in your hands!’

He was particularly pleased with the trick he had played on Abetz to get the Chateldon prisoners back. He had first asked him to plead for the married men with several children – ‘only about thirty or forty’ – and Abetz agreed. When the men returned, there were fewer than he had said and he immediately got in touch with Abetz, saying: ‘Look, I’ve promised the villagers that they’ll be getting forty of their menfolk back. Now they’ll be disappointed. Let’s not spoil the gesture. I’m sending you a list of the rest of the married men. It may come to a little more than forty, but see what you can do, eh?’ Eventually he got the bachelors repatriated as well, also on the ground that it would be a pity to spoil such a fine gesture.

‘The English, now – they’re English,’ he continued. ‘They have an instinct for their own interests. And it’s a fine instinct. They’re not very fond of me in England, it seems, but, if I were a Englishman, I should be a respected man in the Commons. A man who has worked and made a success of his affairs isn’t suspect over there. Not like here, where people who can’t manage their own affairs think they’re cut out to run the State. Herriot turned the heads of all these intellectuals and university men who are always against me; but Herriot has run a town, he understands things. He’s not living all the time in a world of ideas and the wars of religion. Yes – it’s a war of religion these days. Mad!’

His visitor suggested that he did not pay enough attention to French sensitivity; that public opinion needed gentle handling at the moment.

‘French sensitivity!’ Laval repeated. ‘D’you mean I’m not sensitive? Or what? That I don’t understand? I understand perfectly well. But, really, it’s a bit irritating: you’ve got to defend the French all the time, not simply against their neighbours but against themselves. They don’t want to have children, they don’t want to fight, and when you try to avoid war and, afterwards, to avoid the consequences of defeat, they’re still not happy. Well?’

He was bitter about the Marshal. ‘What’s he dream about?’

Simply of getting himself applauded. Is he still fond of children? It's only children that interest him – that and not making war, on anybody. Me, I wanted to make peace, which is more difficult. He can rest easy; I don't want power – or whatever power he left me. It was simple for him, he didn't want to do anything, just wait. Wait for what? He wants everybody at his feet: the French, the German General Staff, Churchill, Roosevelt – probably Stalin as well. He doesn't want to soil his hands. Well, you'll never get anywhere if you're afraid of soiling your hands . . .'

They had arrived at the sawmill and he broke off to get a ruler and measure up the strips of wood that were being cut for parquet-flooring. Then he stumped off down the road to talk with a bottle-merchant and haggle him down from ten sous a bottle to nine.

'He's very good at a bargain,' said the sawmill manager. 'Except that he's just bought a second-hand condenser that'll cost us double the price to repair it.'

From November onwards scouts were sent out to Chateldon from Vichy by the various viziers and sub-viziers in the Marshal's court. The army detested having an admiral as head of the Ministry of Defence; the *attentistes* were horrified at Darlan's readiness for all-out military collaboration; the bureaucrats saw the country being faced with strangulation because he could not deal with the Germans; the Fascists and royalists suspected him of left-wing tendencies. All agreed that he was useless.

Du Moulin, having learned that his rival Pucheu was talking with Laval, sent emissaries of his own. Bernard Ménétrel took advantage of a journey to Paris, where his wife had gone for the birth of their third child, to call on Abetz and sound him out. Abetz, with the defeat of 18 December only partially avenged and with Darlan being hammered by the Armistice Commission instead of negotiating through the Embassy, was all in favour of Laval's return, though there was no great interest in this in Berlin.

In February Abetz's Counsellor, Achenbach, paid an unofficial three-day visit to Vichy, where Ménétrel got him to the Marshal's table for four meals; but Pétain was hesitant. De Gaulle's seizure of Saint-Pierre and Miquelon in December had

increased American dislike of him and correspondingly warmed their feelings towards Pétain. He did not want to lose this support, as he knew he would do if he recalled 'the evil genius' Laval.

Laval spent much of the winter in Paris, brooding on the catastrophes that he saw ahead. The city was cold and cheerless, hating the Germans and resentful of the British, who on 3 March bombed the Renault factory at Boulogne-Billancourt, killing 500 people and injuring 1,200. Göring came to Paris for a two-day visit and Laval was given an interview with him in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where the gross German sat behind the ornate desk that Laval had used in the past.

Göring began by demanding that the interview should be secret and not revealed to Abetz. He was surly and angry and told Laval that 'we have been misled in believing that we could get honest collaboration from your country. We have revised our policy and henceforward we shall treat France in accordance with the feeling of hostility that she constantly displays towards us'.

Laval protested that there was no reason why the two countries should not reach an understanding, but Göring warned him: 'If the Marshal offers you a return to power, refuse it. For you, it would be either too late or too early. You have been an honest enemy. Perhaps we shall meet after the war, when peace has been signed, and then you will have the opportunity to defend the interests of your country.'

It was excellent advice, though it is not clear from what motives Göring offered it. Probably he wanted to finish with the feeble negotiations of Ribbentrop and Abetz and impose his own harsh economic policy. Certainly he flew into a temper when he learned that Laval had ignored his warning.

A few days later Josée's husband, René de Chambrun, went to Vichy to ask Ménétrel's help in obtaining from the Marshal a recommendation for a friend who wanted to gain admission to the Paris Bar. Pétain came into Ménétrel's office while they were talking and greeted de Chambrun as 'Bunny' – much to the envy of Du Moulin, who was also in the room and who peevishly described de Chambrun as 'a vain braggart with an ill-concealed taste for intrigue and bluff.'

'And how's your embarrassing father-in-law?' asked the Marshal.

'He's well,' said de Chambrun. 'He told me to give you his good wishes.' He added that Laval was very worried about some things that he had learned in Paris.

'Do you know what they are?' Pétain asked. De Chambrun said he knew some of them, and the Marshal took him into his study, where they remained for about an hour.

Du Moulin tried to pump Ménétrel that evening, but Ménétrel told him that the Marshal and de Chambrun had not discussed anything of importance. In fact, Pétain had listened with interest to what de Chambrun had to say and had then said: 'Your father-in-law is a very skilful and shrewd statesman. I intend to see him shortly.'

Two days later Pétain told Du Moulin that he could have a long lie-in the following morning. 'I shan't be dealing with any correspondence. I'm going to give myself a nice long walk in the forest.'

Du Moulin's *grasse matinée* scarcely built up his strength sufficiently to withstand the shock of the news with which General Laure greeted him shortly before lunch. Laure had been questioning the Marshal's chauffeur and had discovered that Pétain's morning walk in the forest of Randan had been spent in the company of Laval, the only observer of this secret meeting being Ménétrel, who had gone to Chateldon to arrange it.

During the three weeks of negotiations which followed, three weeks of demands, refusals, proposals, denials and intrigue, the motives and intentions of most of the principal characters are reasonably clear.

Pétain realised that Laval could handle the Germans better than Darlan had done and was glad to have a scapegoat in the increasingly dark days that faced Vichy; but he did not wish to lose credit with the Americans by openly asking Laval to return.

Laval, who perhaps had persuaded himself that his journey to Randan was merely to warn the Marshal of the growing menace from the Germans, was incapable of halting there, since he was still convinced that he was the only man who could save France.

To his wife and daughter, and to the villagers of Chateldon with whom he often discussed his affairs, it seemed impossible that he would give up the life of retirement that had restored him to health and involve himself once more in the fortunes of a Government with such a clearly stormy and probably disastrous future. But even the fervent opposition of the two women on whom his happiness was built could not diminish his self-confidence, his limitless belief in his own intelligence and powers of negotiation.

Of the two amateur Cabinet-makers behind the scenes, Ménétré and Du Moulin, the first wanted Laval's return because he thought it would save the Marshal, while the second wanted to get rid of Darlan but without reinstating Laval, who remembered the part he had played on 13 December and had rebuffed his advances. Brought into constant daily contact because of their duties to the Marshal, they watched each other like hawks while maintaining the pretence of cordial friendship.

It is Darlan's actions which present the mystery at this time. Expert at looking one way and pointing the other, he alternately offered posts in the Government to Laval and proclaimed that he was determined to resist him, and he finally committed a diplomatic blunder of such monumental stupidity that it is difficult to believe that it was unintentional. Since he emerged from the hurly-burly with the one post that he wished to retain — that of the Marshal's official successor — and with full control of all French forces by land, sea and air, it is possible that he was the cleverest of them all.

The consternation in Vichy at the news of Pétain's meeting with Laval was no greater than that in London and Washington, where the return of 'Black Peter' was seen as a threat of closer French collaboration with the Germans. Ralph Heinzen, the United Press correspondent who was close to Laval, told Admiral Leahy that if Laval came back to power his policy would be to encourage the recruitment of volunteers against Russia, but to refuse any military aid to Germany which would force France to mobilise; and that he would try to dislodge de Gaulle from French overseas territories. On 30 March Leahy handed Pétain a stiff note from Roosevelt, stating that the recall of Laval would make it impossible for America to continue its attitude of helpfulness

to France. Pétain replied that he had no wish to have Laval back in the Government: 'he is physically and morally repugnant to me.'

He evidently conquered his repugnance, for Ménétrel again went to Chateldon and invited Laval to meet the Marshal at the Pavillon Sévigné on Maundy Thursday, 2 April. When Laval drove up to the hotel, the Marshal was waiting for him in the pleasant little garden surrounded by lime and chestnut trees. They went through the large yellow salon into the secluded study at the rear, leaving behind them the inseparable Du Moulin and Ménétrel, walking affectionately up and down the lawn, linked arm in arm and each desperately seeking an opportunity to slink away and eavesdrop on the conversation.

They would not have heard much to interest them. Laval assured the Marshal that he had no personal ambitions. 'I'm in no hurry. I'm not after your strong-box. You can recall me when you think it advisable. I am profoundly happy to have been able to inform you of the facts. You now know the horrifying threats that hang over France. . . . I beg you in your policy towards Germany to take account of these threats, which are not imaginary and which could become catastrophic.'

Pétain thanked him and they parted. Laval issued a statement to the Press which seemed to suggest that there would be no further meetings, but which also shrewdly implied that the next step lay with the Marshal. 'As initiator of the policy of Montoire and being of the opinion that the external situation of France is becoming daily more grave, I considered it my duty to discuss this with Marshal Pétain. Conversations have taken place between the Head of the State and myself. They were concluded today at the Pavillon Sévigné.'

It was apparently a check to Ménétrel in his attempt to bring back Laval; and a check to Du Moulin in his efforts to get rid of Darlan. But the Marshal now found himself confronted with a new threat to his authority: Benoist-Méchin arrived from Paris with the news that the Germans were setting up an S.S. command in the occupied zone which would eventually take over the civil administration from the Wehrmacht, and that Heydrich was to be appointed as *gauleiter*.

As in 1940, Pétain tried to by-pass Abetz, the Wehrmacht and the S.S. by sending Colonel Fonck to get Göring's support for an entirely new Government. Du Moulin spent a busy Easter drawing up a list of Ministers, headed by three Ministers of State at the top of Pétain's beloved 'pyramid' and excluding both Darlan and Laval. Fonck set off on his mission. He never got across the demarkation line; somebody, perhaps Ménétrel, had warned Abetz of the plot.

Meanwhile, Darlan had committed a blunder of such conspicuous imbecility that it seems certain to have been deliberate. He told Krug von Nidda, Abetz's Consul-General in Vichy, that there was no likelihood of Laval's return because Pétain was too much afraid of upsetting Roosevelt, whose note he showed him. Von Nidda reported to Abetz; Abetz to Hitler. Hitler flew into a rage.

On 10 April Krug von Nidda told Darlan that the Führer had declared that: 'According to whether or not the Marshal charges M. Laval with the formation of a new Government, I shall judge whether France prefers the friendship of the United States or that of Germany.' The reaction can scarcely have surprised Darlan. What did shock him was when von Nidda handed him a copy of the letter that Pétain had given to Fonck and in which he discovered that his name did not figure in the list of proposed Ministers, not even as Minister of Marine.

The Marshal, rarely caught out in his secret transactions, showed genuine embarrassment when Darlan confronted him with the copy of the letter. He changed ground and suggested that Darlan should go to Paris and talk with von Stulpnagel – again by-passing Abetz – and explain that Laval could not be taken back into the Government because he was making impossible demands.

Darlan insisted on the Marshal giving him a letter that affirmed his trust in him. The Marshal wrote: 'You know well that you have all my confidence and that I cannot conceive that you would not retain the direction of the Government.' Striking while the iron was hot, Darlan also got Pétain to sign a decree retaining him in active naval command irrespective of age.

They agreed that Darlan should set out for Paris the following

morning; but, thanks to another of the mysterious leakages of information with which the history of Vichy is speckled, Abetz got wind of Darlan's project and telephoned during the night, forbidding him to cross the line until the Laval question was settled. Darlan decided to play safe. He could not trust the Marshal or many members of the Cabinet; he might strike a bargain with Laval, who was more likely to keep his word.

On the evening of 13 April he drove out to Chateldon with de Brinon, who had arrived from Paris that afternoon. They were greeted with loud barking from the dogs and some preliminary growls from Laval, who was no stranger to what had been going on. He gave Darlan a rough handling. 'You sent me an extraordinarily insolent note,' he told him. 'You said I am unpopular and public opinion must be prepared.' He returned, as always, to 13 December: 'They tell me you were my chief adversary.'

Darlan protested that he had known nothing about the plot until the last moment and had then merely recommended that the conspirators, led by Alibert, should talk to the Marshal about it. As for the arrest and other excesses: he had been at the cinema.

Laval said that he would not take the same risk again. If he returned, it would be as head of the Government and with full powers. But he had no objection to Darlan's remaining as 'dauphin' to the Marshal. Darlan left, highly satisfied. When de Brinon returned to Vichy and reported the conversation to the Marshal, Pétain remarked that he was satisfied too: Darlan had never known how to govern, anyway.

The strange interlude of shadow-boxing was over. There had been only one important casualty, Du Moulin, whom the Marshal dismissed after the leakage of the Fonck letter, and with his usual gracious farewell: 'No man ever made me commit so many stupidities.'

Laval saw the Marshal on 14 April and began discussions about his Ministers. For himself, he insisted on the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, the Interior and Information, and the new title of 'Head of the Government'. He was determined that there should not be another 13 December.

Pétain had got rid of Darlan; he had found an enthusiastic whipping-boy in case things went wrong; he could prove to the

Americans that he had taken Laval back only under threats from Germany. When his wife (who detested Laval as much as Mme Laval detested Pétain) asked querulously at lunch: 'What's he going to bring us?' the Marshal said testily: 'Be quiet. He does his job well and I have confidence in him.'

As Laval was returning to the château after the announcement of his new posts and title, one of the villagers shook his head and asked: 'And what do we call you now? Monsieur le Président or Monsieur le Dictateur?'

Laval grinned: 'You know me better than that.' Then his face straightened and he stared at the man for a moment. 'Do you think I want the job? It's my duty to take it.'

THE ROAD TO HELL

[1]

HIS FAMILY WERE horrified. At Bordeaux, nearly two years before, his wife had protested bitterly at his involving himself in a Government of defeat when he had had no part in either the declaration of war or, officially, in the request for an armistice. Now the situation was far worse. The 'correct' Germans of 1940 had reverted to their true nature as the hostage-shooting Germans of 1942. The organised Communist underground had embarked on a series of assassinations and acts of sabotage that would result in more German atrocities. Those Frenchmen (and they were probably in the majority) who had welcomed a policy of collaboration with the kindly and imminently victorious Germans in 1940, were now undeceived as to their kindliness and doubtful of their victory.

'The Germans are crooks,' Mme Laval said angrily. 'They will cheat you.' But this was the one point on which nobody could convince him. He was sincere in assuring the loyal but puzzled Chateldonais that he was returning to power because it was his duty. He was sincere too, unhappily for himself, in believing that it was his duty because he was the only man in France who could save her. His road to hell was paved with good intentions, and he took that road because of sinful pride.

He had no illusions about his popularity. A rapid poll of public opinion in Paris during the three days after his return, produced the unexpected result that, in answer to the question: 'Do you think that Pierre Laval can work in the interest of France?',

forty per cent answered 'Yes' and eleven per cent 'Hope so, but will wait and see'. Laval glanced at the figures with amused scepticism and remarked: 'I don't worry about being popular. If I wanted to gain popularity, I should turn my back on my duty to France.'

Later in the year, when Weygand said to him: 'Ninety-five per cent of the French people do not think as you do,' Laval grinned and replied: 'You are mistaken – it's ninety-eight per cent.' Much later still, he told a friend: 'Do you know what they say about me? They say: "Laval – he's never managed to get more than ten per cent of the prisoners arrested by the German police released. He's incapable or a bluffer." Or else it's: "Laval – he's personally had more than seven thousand Frenchmen released who had been arrested by the enemy. He's saved more than five hundred condemned to death. He must be well in with the Germans. You can see he's a traitor."'

He was an adept propagandist, with first-hand experience from his newspaper and radio interests, but he publicised his policies rather than himself. Since his public policies were soon to be far different from his private ones, this merely served to increase his unpopularity. But there was an element of pride here, too. He had been right – and misjudged – so often before; it was fitting that he should still be misjudged and misunderstood in this supreme moment of his career. The moment of recognition and rehabilitation would be all the more triumphant. Sinful pride; arrogant self-confidence: this was a man who surely nurtured within himself the seeds of his own destruction.

In 1940 he had been convinced that Germany would win the war; in 1942 he was still convinced that she could not lose it. Neither the Americans nor the British seemed able to make any effective reply to the Japanese, who had flooded across South-East Asia, through the Philippines to New Guinea and Java, and, with their capture of the Andaman Islands in March, were established in the Indian Ocean. Rommel had consolidated his position in North Africa; the Wehrmacht was mounting a spring offensive which it hoped would settle the fate of Russia. From the Pyrenees to the North Cape, from the Aegean to the Gulf of Finland, Europe twitched under its penitential shirt

of warrior ants and seemed to have no hope of shaking them off.

As far as Britain and America were concerned, Laval felt confident that he had time in which to restore the relations with Germany that Darlan had disrupted. It would be many months and years before the Anglo-Saxons could raise and train the armies necessary to invade the Continent and he hoped before then to be in a position to act as mediator between the Germans and the Americans, who, he quite inexplicably believed, would accept him as a go-between.

It was the Russians who worried him. He despised them as *idéologues* and feared them as ruthless and inhuman barbarians; and he recognised Stalin as a far more intelligent and capable leader than Hitler or Mussolini. 'My policy,' he said, is to act in such a way that the Germans will not be so strong as to fetter us, but also that Bolshevism will not be able to annihilate us.'

He called on Admiral Leahy and tried to persuade him that Roosevelt should make peace moves, so that Germany could concentrate all her efforts on the defeat of Russia. 'This is a civil war in which only Stalin can be the victor if the democracies continue to fight against the Reich. It is in the interests of the United States as well as Europe that it should end as soon as possible. Among the heads of the non-belligerent Governments, I am the only one apart from General Franco who has had conversations with the Chancellor. I am the best placed to make new personal contacts with the Chancellor.'

Leahy reported to Washington: 'Laval is not on our side in this war. . . . He is convinced that the interests of France are irrevocably linked with those of Germany. . . . His Government will carry collaboration with Germany as far as possible in order to help in the defeat of what he calls Anglo-Soviet Bolshevism.' Roosevelt carried out the threats in his note to the Marshal: Leahy was recalled to Washington and the French fleet in the Antilles was forced to disarm and immobilise itself.

In public Pétain and Laval were acting like a pair of long-parted lovers. The Marshal, in a broadcast announcing the new Government, said: 'Today, in a moment as decisive as that of June 1940, I again find myself with M. Pierre Laval,

resuming the work of national and European organisation whose foundations we laid together.'

At a Press conference Laval returned the compliment. 'If I am Head of the Government, it is by virtue of the delegation of authority with which the Marshal has entrusted me. The Marshal's authority is essential to me in the accomplishment of my mission. It is with courage that I face a difficult task; to succeed I need always to lean upon his wisdom and experience.' With the accusations of 13 December in mind, he made a point of visiting the Marshal every morning when he was in Vichy and reporting on his actions and plans; though there is no indication that these actions and plans were ever modified by any comment that Pétain cared to make.

There was no ground for discord in the first six months of the new Government. Pétain was pottering with plans for his 'National Revolution', which had so far produced only a handful of laws aimed at National Repression. Laval distrusted them, but restricted himself to making fun of them; though on one occasion he told Pétain bluntly that the large portrait of the Marshal which hung in the town hall of Aubervilliers, as in every other public building in the country, was faced by the bust of Marianne which Laval had personally ordered to be reinstated.

He managed to control some of the more dangerous stupidities of the Marshal and his followers; he suspended the Fascist-oriented National Council; he reinstated some of the Freemasons whom the Marshal's witch-hunters had been chasing out of all the public services; but he was not ready for a serious battle on internal policy: 'That is your business,' he told the Marshal.

He showed no particular interest in the form of Government that France would have after the war, though he talked in general terms of the primary claims of labour and the necessity for founding a republic that would be 'new, stronger, more muscular, more truly human' (the pro-Nazi journalists in Paris thereafter jeered at him as 'the muscular republican'). Accusations that he saw himself as a Fascist-type dictator seem very wide of the mark. He had neither the personality nor the physical attributes of a dictator, and his pleasure lay in argument and negotiation, not in strong-arm *diktats*.

Addressing the mayors of the district of Le Cantal, he said: 'I speak in a country old in freedom . . . and I affirm that we entered this war for ideas that were not ours. If Russia has Communism in her country, that is her affair – but let her keep her Communism. If Germany has National Socialism in her country, that is her affair – but let her keep her National Socialism. If America and Britain cherish anti-Fascist ideologies, that is their affair. But we who are Auvergnats, who do not know Fascism, who have never been subjected to the imprint of any race except the ancient race of our countryside, nobody will force us to accept these ideologies.'

Laval formed his Government on 18 April with one essential aim in view: to make contact with the Germans and regain their confidence. Though he did not know it, his pitch had already been queered by a brave elderly gentleman with a game leg who, twenty-four hours earlier, had lowered himself 150 feet down the side of an ancient fortress on the Elbe and disappeared into the underbrush.

The fortress was Königstein, where some hundred French generals and admirals were held as prisoners of war. The escaper was General Giraud, sixty-three years old, former commander of the Ninth Army. His escape had been arranged by his wife and members of the army's *Deuxième Bureau*, and a week later he arrived safely in Switzerland, having spent part of the journey in a train, chatting affably with an S.S. major while the whole of the rest of Germany was being turned upside down in search of him.

The violence of the German reaction to Giraud's escape sprang from two sources. One was their sense of humiliation at being unable to lay their hands on a Frenchman more than six feet tall, whose description had been notified to every police station and army post and whose successful escape route covered 500 miles. The other was that Hitler had confused Giraud with de Gaulle as the author of the military treatises which de Gaulle had published before the war and with which he had been impressed. 'That man alone is worth thirty divisions,' he raged.

On 28 April, four days after Giraud's arrival in Switzerland, Hitler informed Pétain that he was setting up an S.S. headquarters in Paris under the command of General Karl Oberg.

Gauleiter Bürckel announced that more Frenchmen would be expelled from Lorraine. Field-Marshal Keitel broke off all negotiations on the release of prisoners and threatened to demand the return of those few who had so far been released on parole.

Giraud arrived in Vichy from his home near Lyon on 29 April and was warmly congratulated by the Marshal. On the floor below his reception was cooler. Laval told Giraud how much his escape had infuriated Hitler and asked to see him the following day, when he told him that the Germans were threatening reprisals and asked him if he were willing to go back to Germany. Giraud said that he would consider it on one condition: that the Germans released all married prisoners.

The total of married prisoners was somewhere between 400,000 and 500,000, a fanciful price for even a general to put on himself. Laval discontinued the conversation and Giraud returned to Lyon, but had scarcely got home before a message from the Marshal's office ordered him to return: Pétain had received a telegram from Ribbentrop demanding that Giraud should go back to Germany and offering to fetch him in his personal plane and give him accommodation at the Adlon Hotel.

Giraud again refused. Laval pointed out that, in Germany, he would be a free man and could be appointed assistant to Scapini, who was looking after the interests of French prisoners in Germany and held the rank of ambassador. Giraud replied that he would not serve under anybody and that a general was of at least as high a rank as an ambassador. Again he went back to Lyon.

Hitler continued to rage. He insisted, quite wrongly, that Giraud had given his word not to escape and had broken it. The army and S.S. egged him on, glad of an opportunity to discomfit Ribbentrop, who was having no success in his attempts to get Giraud back. On 1 May Hitler sent a personal order to Abetz, instructing him to insist that the French Government should force Giraud to return. Abetz telephoned Laval and asked him to meet him at Moulins at 1.30 p.m. on 2 May.

Laval took Darlan with him, as head of the armed forces, and the conference was held in the Hôtel de Paris, next to the lycée where he had first gone to study for his *baccalauréat* nearly forty-five

years before. Abetz emphasised the importance of offering a sop to Hitler and, knowing that this was the subject closest to Laval's heart, added that the future of the prisoners of war depended on it. But there was nothing that Laval could do. He accepted the right of an officer to escape; he refused to have any part in forcing him to return. But in private he expressed himself freely about Giraud: 'That swine! He's landed me in the——!'

He returned to Vichy and talked with Giraud, who had been brought from Lyon by aeroplane. In the late afternoon he rang Abetz and suggested a further meeting at Moulins that evening. He offered to bring Giraud with him, provided that Abetz guaranteed the General's safe-conduct back into the unoccupied zone if he persisted in his refusal. Abetz gave his word.

At nine o'clock that evening, when they walked up the hotel steps, through the glass doors and into the small salon on the right of the entrance lobby, they were met not by Abetz but, ominously, by the local army commander, who during the next two hours kept the Führer's headquarters informed of the progress of the negotiations. Laval and Darlan, like two tip-staffs in charge of a truant, remained silent while Abetz argued with Giraud.

Abetz repeated Ribbentrop's offer of a luxury suite in the Adlon. Giraud offered instead to go as a free man, provided he was given Scapini's post as head of the prisoner-of-war delegation.

This was unacceptable to the Germans. A prisoner had escaped and a prisoner must return. Giraud then repeated the suggestion that he had made to Laval: that he would return on condition that all the married prisoners were released. Abetz, thinking he had misheard and lapsing into the heavy accent that marred his otherwise excellent French, asked: '*Compien ssont-ils?*' 'About 500,000,' Giraud replied.

'Impertinence!' Abetz exclaimed, and added in German: '*Der Kerl versteht nichts.*' Giraud, who spoke German and had used it to great purpose during his escape, asked the Ambassador to mind his manners. Abetz gave up in disgust. One of the Germans asked Giraud if he felt no debt of comradeship to the other prisoners, but got no reply.

As the three Frenchmen got up to leave the hotel, the German

general gave orders for Giraud's arrest. Laval reminded Abetz of his promise and threatened to resign if Giraud were not allowed to leave with them. The three went back in silence over the Madeleine bridge, across the demarkation line. The following morning Pétain had another talk with Giraud, but could make no headway. The most that could be got from him was a letter in which he pledged his loyalty to the Marshal and his policy.

Just six months later the letter was published in all the French newspapers when Giraud escaped once more, this time from France, and joined the American forces in North Africa. For the moment it was better than nothing, and Laval remarked hopefully: 'I shall be able to appease the Germans with it.'

He was wrong. The following day Keitel told the Armistice Commission that all individual and personal favours, all considerations on family grounds, all individual liberations, all social measures of any kind and all visits by close relations to prisoners were to be suspended; there would be no question of leave, on any grounds whatever; French generals in German hands would be transferred to fortresses and kept in isolated cells; the German Government reserved the right to resort to further measures.

That same day a British expeditionary force landed in Madagascar, destroying the town of Diego Suarez after a forty-eight-hour battle. The next day, the worst blow of all fell: Heydrich, the sinister 'Protector of Czechoslovakia', arrived in Paris to set up complete S.S. control in the occupied zone. Laval immediately asked for an interview with him but was met with the blunt reply: 'I am not here to negotiate.'

Heydrich summoned René Bousquet, the young man whom Laval had recently appointed as Secretary-General in charge of police, and to him he read the orders that he had brought from Hitler — orders which were evidently the first step in setting up a Quisling Government. All the French pro-Nazi parties were to be organised into a single party. From this party would be appointed new heads of the police force. This police force would operate in collaboration with the S.S. 'These decisions of the *Reichskanzler* must be applied immediately, if it is desired that other and more grave decisions shall not be taken by the German Government.'

Fortunately, Laval had chosen well when he persuaded Bousquet to take over control of the police, for Bousquet was a man not only of great intelligence but also of great physical and moral courage. He was certainly not the man to be overawed by Heydrich. When the S.S. General had finished reading, Bousquet exclaimed: 'I see no reason why I have been brought here. It seems that the notification I have just received puts an end to the exercise of my duties.' His indignation rising, he launched into a recital of the crimes and stupidities of the German occupation authorities, recklessly lecturing the sinister figure who sat facing him.

It was touch and go whether the brute or the serf gained the upper hand in Heydrich's mind. He remained staring at Bousquet. Finally the grudging respect of the barbarian for the civilised man triumphed. 'I have learned much,' he said. 'You are a brave man. You have spoken, in moving terms, of hostages and reprisals. I am inclined to think that these should be stopped. But I cannot undertake any engagement myself. All that I can say is, having come to Paris to enforce an order from the *Reichskanzler*, I agree that this order should be deferred. I will make a report to Berlin.'

[2]

THE DANGER HAD been staved off, at any rate for the moment; but the threatening German attitude had not changed. Hearing that Göring was expected in Paris, Laval went there on 11 May but returned to Vichy five days later with empty hands: Göring was still annoyed with him for having rejected his advice. The release of the prisoners of war remained his obsession and he wrote to Abetz protesting against the punitive measures that had followed Giraud's escape. 'I cannot believe that the Führer will make 1,200,000 French prisoners and their families suffer for the behaviour of this general.'

The Germans remained silent. He now began to consider a manœuvre that was to loom large in the indictment against him. The Germans, suffering heavy losses on the Russian front, were

having to call more and more of their workers to the armed forces. They had already advertised in France for workers to take their places. It was a safe assumption that their next move would be to convert the invitation into an order: particularly since Sauckel, the *gauleiter* of Thuringia, had recently been appointed to organise the recruitment of millions of workers from all the occupied territories. Laval saw the opportunity to offer as a bargain something that would soon be taken from him by force.

On 12 May he wrote to Ribbentrop, telling him that France wished to help Germany in her fight against Bolshevism and that he would like to see Frenchmen taking the places of German workers who were leaving their factories to fight on the Eastern front. 'The French are linked to their soil, but I know they will be ready to leave it for a task whose historic and national significance has been explained to them. I will do my best in this direction and I beg you to help me with a view to creating a psychological atmosphere that will facilitate my actions.'

But the Germans were not to be tempted with soft words. The offer came too pat upon the appointment of Sauckel. Ribbentrop replied, thanking Laval for his good intentions, but adding that 'it is natural that the German Government cannot henceforward let itself be influenced by hopes or assurances, but only by the actions of French policy.'

Sauckel arrived in Paris, a bald fat brute from the dockside slums of Hamburg whose ruthlessness had won him a respected position in the upper echelons of the Nazi Party and Hitler's special confidence. The Czechs, the Belgians, the Dutch and even the Serbians had contributed more voluntary workers to the German war effort than France, and Sauckel was determined to have the proportions rectified.

During Darlan's régime, when the French economy was still affected by the defeat and by the dispersion of many of the workers, 150,000 Frenchmen had signed on at the German employment agencies, attracted by the good wages that were offered. But of these more than half never returned to Germany after their first leave at home. In January 1942 and again soon after Laval's return to power, the Germans had asked for Vichy

co-operation in enlisting workers. The response was negligible.

Unlike the other occupied countries, France was technically protected by the armistice and her workers could not be simply rounded up and transported by the Germans. But in the occupied zone, where the majority of the industrial workers were to be found, the Germans had many opportunities for intimidation. They had already ordered employers in many of the large towns to furnish lists of their workers. They could order longer hours of work and thus create partial unemployment. They could completely close down selected factories by blocking deliveries of raw materials and coal.

Laval met Sauckel with a repetition of the statements that he had made in his letter to Ribbentrop. He was delighted to help the Germans in every way to beat the Bolsheviks, but it was impossible to carry public opinion with him unless the Germans helped to prepare the right psychological atmosphere. The French were, after all, going as volunteers. They must be shown that what they were doing was in the interest of France. The best plan would be for the Germans to agree that for every skilled worker who went to Germany, one prisoner of war would be sent back to France.

It was an outrageous suggestion, since the Germans were already using French prisoners on various forms of non-military work and encouraging volunteers from the prison camps to work outside in the factories. They would gain very little indeed from the exchange. But Laval insisted, and Sauckel agreed to refer the proposal to Hitler. By mid-June, Laval had arrived at a compromise: one prisoner of war to be repatriated for every three workers arriving in Germany.

To carry out his side of the bargain, Laval broadcast on 22 June, outlining his programme and appealing for volunteers. No other single statement did him so much harm.

'I have been in power for two months,' he said. 'Events have scarcely been in my favour . . .' With veiled references to 13 December and Giraud's escape, he spoke of how the opportunity had been lost for a large return of prisoners and how Hitler had since suspended all negotiations to ease their captivity. 'During this time, unemployment has increased in France. Many workmen

are without employment while in Germany there is great need for workers. In these circumstances, there is new hope for our prisoners.' And with this he came to his project of *la relève*: the relief of sentries, or changing of the guard. He outlined the favourable terms that the Germans offered and continued:

'And now the *relève* begins. . . . Workers of France! It is for the liberation of the prisoners that you go to work in Germany! It is for our country that you will go in great numbers! It is to enable France to take her place in the New Europe that you will respond to my appeal!'

He concluded his speech with a reference to Pétain: 'Frenchmen: a great soldier whose whole life is an example of sacrifice and discipline presides over the destinies of our country. I speak to you this evening in his name. The Marshal would tell you that France has never let history be made without her and that one cannot climb from the abyss of misfortune except by the paths of courage!'

The great soldier was about to be very unhappy that he had allowed the speech to be made in his name. He had not foreseen the storm of anger that was to greet one sentence that Laval had delivered in the first part of his broadcast: a sentence which Laval admitted later was 'like a drop of acid on the open wounds of France'.

Laval had spoken of his desire to re-establish normal relations with Germany and Italy; of the New Europe that would arise after the war; of his hope that France would have a worthy place in it.

'To construct that Europe, Germany is at the moment engaged in gigantic battles. With others, she must accept immense sacrifices and she is not sparing the blood of her young men: to throw them into battle, she is seeking them in the factories and in the fields.

'I wish for German victory because, without it, Communism will establish itself everywhere . . .'

When Laval roughed out this speech, his associates were alarmed at the reference to German victory (he had at first written 'I believe in and wish for [*crois et souhaite*] German victory') and one of them, Charles Rochat, Permanent Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, had protested that the Marshal

must not be associated with such a statement without his knowledge. Laval said he was quite willing to discuss it with Pétain and went up to the third floor with Rochat.

Pétain examined the text and, as Rochat had expected, said: 'You cannot say "I believe in German victory".' Then, to Rochat's astonishment, he continued: 'You are not a military man. You are in no position to judge the outcome of the conflict. You know nothing about it.' He accepted that, as a civilian, Laval was perfectly entitled to wish for it.

On the day following the broadcast Laval explained to the Council of Ministers his reasons for making the speech, and the others accepted it without discussion, Darlan having already sent him a congratulatory note. But soon reports reached Pétain that, despite Government propaganda in all the newspapers, a large section of the nation was incensed that a Frenchman should have publicly wished for the triumph of their brutal conquerors.

Laval's popularity fell to zero. Even in Chateldon a deputation of the villagers, led by the doctor and the miller, went up to the château to protest that he had gone too far. The Marshal promptly went to ground and on 26 June refused to allow a phrase from one of his speeches to be used on a recruiting poster for the *relève*.

Laval claimed that only an unqualified public statement of this kind could convince the Germans of his sincerity and enable him to negotiate with them, and that on later occasions only the combination of his dismissal on 13 December, his near-assassination in 1941 and his 'I wish for German victory' phrase of 1942 persuaded the Germans to trust him and permit the continued existence of a French Government instead of installing a *gauleiter*. This is probably true; but it is also probably true that the whole sentence (not merely the first five words, which were all that were usually quoted in accusing him) represented his genuine belief. He foresaw that the total defeat of the Germans must result in a great strengthening of the Russian position in Europe. His fears grew more acute as the British and Americans began to talk of demanding 'unconditional surrender'.

It was soon evident that the *relève* would be a failure. In the ten weeks that followed Laval's speech, Sauckel got 17,000 skilled

workers, instead of the 150,000 that he had asked for. At the end of August he announced a census of all civilians aged between eighteen and fifty-five in all occupied territories in preparation for the mobilisation of all male and female labour. He let Vichy know that the occupied zone would be included in the order.

On 4 September 1942 the Vichy Government passed a law rendering all men between eighteen and fifty, and all women between twenty-one and thirty-five, liable for compulsory labour wherever the Government might direct them, though no woman was to be required to work away from her home. By doing so, Vichy retained its position as an independent Government, which it would have lost had the Germans broken the armistice terms and applied industrial conscription to the occupied zone. It made its own law less comprehensive and harsh than the German edict. It preserved the conditions of the *relève* under which a proportion of prisoners was repatriated in return for the workers. But it also continued the dangerous policy of taking on its own shoulders the responsibility for unpopular measures dictated by the Germans.

Laval continually proclaimed that he did not mind soiling his hands in the interest of France. But there are degrees of filth, and in dealing with the Germans he was to be involved in some of the most nauseating: notably in the persecution of the Jews. He had often been called a Jew, particularly by the *Action Française*, and his wife a Portuguese Jewess. The Germans suspected him of weakness towards the Jews and later learned that he was secretly helping them. In September 1943 the S.S. commander in Vichy reported that: 'President Laval frequently personally receives Jews or persons coming to intervene on their behalf. Certain members of his immediate entourage are friends of Jews. We cannot rely on him to support our anti-Jewish measures.' But in fact he could not avoid doing so.

The anti-Jewish laws concocted by Alibert in 1940 had guaranteed respect for Jewish life and property, but under Darlan's Government a series of additional laws had brought the French treatment of Jews more and more in conformity with the German: the 'aryanisation' of Jewish firms, usually without compensation; the institution of a *numerus clausus*, restricting the number of Jewish university students to three per cent and the

number of Jewish doctors and lawyers to two per cent; the internment and formation into labour battalions of all foreign Jews.

In April 1941 Darlan had set up a special office to handle Jewish questions, with Xavier Vallat as commissaire in charge of it, and had followed this with the creation of a special anti-Jewish police section. Vallat was not sufficiently fanatical to satisfy the Germans and in February 1942 was ordered out of the occupied zone. Darlan replaced him with Darquier de Pellepoix, a Jew-baiter of long standing and a perfect team-mate for Hauptmann Dannecker, the twenty-seven-year-old sadistic psychopath who headed the anti-Jewish section of the Gestapo in Paris and had already organised several brutal round-ups of Jews in the capital.

To check Darquier, Laval put the Commissariat for Jewish Questions under his own control and stopped the raids by the special police, whom he later disbanded. In June 1942 the Germans began to agitate for Vichy to give Darquier more power and for all foreign Jews to be handed over to them. They followed this with the announcement that, since the Jews were a danger to military security in the occupied zone, they intended to transfer all of them – French as well as foreign – to Poland where they would be ‘regrouped in colonies’.

Here was a fresh threat to French sovereignty. It was possible to argue that the Germans were entitled under the armistice to deport non-French Jews, but they certainly had no right to take a block of French nationals out of the country, even on the excuse of military necessity. The Council of Ministers met and agreed to contest the German claim. Darquier went off to warn Dannecker that Laval had begun to falsify the figures and would show only 11,000 foreign Jews in the unoccupied zone, instead of 54,000.

The Germans banned Jews from all public places in Paris: cafés, cinemas, museums, swimming pools, parks and even telephone kiosks. They were allowed to enter shops only during one hour a day: in the afternoon, by which time the day’s supply of unrationed goods would long have been exhausted.

Dannecker sent for Leguay, Bousquet’s representative in Paris, and ordered him to have 20,000 Jews arrested by the French police. Leguay refused and was threatened with arrest.

He telephoned Vichy where Bousquet answered that, on Laval's authority, he was to continue to refuse. The following morning Dannecker flew into a frothing rage, threw the telephone on the floor and broke it, and again threatened Leguay with arrest.

Laval went up to Paris and lodged an official protest with Abetz against Dannecker's attitude towards a representative of the Government. Abetz accepted it, but said that he could do nothing about the German intention to deport all Jews, French or foreign: the decision did not lie in his hands. Laval then went to argue with Oberg, the S.S. commander.

Oberg was adamant. 'The trains are ready and, at any cost and by any means, we must fill them. The Jewish problem is not a question of nationality, as far as we are concerned. The French police must co-operate with us; otherwise it is we who will arrest the Jews, whether they are French or not.'

Laval finally got the Germans to agree to a compromise. Vichy would accept the German claim to authority over the foreign Jews, in the free zone as well as in the occupied one, on condition that the Germans made no attempt to deport French Jews. Laval returned to Vichy and alerted the Papal Nuncio and the foreign ambassadors and ministers. He dragged out negotiations through August and September. Some foreign Jews – notably those from Spain and Rumania – were saved by the action of their ambassadors; others, who had married French nationals or had given service to France, were granted the protection of the Vichy Government, despite German protestations; but in the end the horrible evacuation to the occupied zone and on to Germany began.

Seventy-five thousand Jews in Paris were saved by the surrender of approximately half their number in the free zone. Actuarially, Laval had made a good bargain. By the end of the war the Germans had wiped out ninety per cent of the Jewish population of the other occupied countries but in France fifty per cent of the pre-war French and foreign Jewish population – representing perhaps ninety per cent of the purely French Jewish population – still remained alive. But those who had gone in cattle-trucks to the concentration camps, the gas-chambers and

the incinerators, had gone with Vichy's consent and by the order of Laval's Ministry.

This was the insoluble dilemma of collaboration. To maintain its authority and prevent the installation of a *gauleiter* or a Quisling Government of French Nazis, Vichy was forced into compromise after compromise, each time loading itself with an increasing share of German guilt. Just as the French Jews were spared almost total annihilation, so were the French people as a whole spared much physical degradation, torment and loss: but with each new concession Vichy became more and more a name of shame.

Many men – lesser and greater – would have resigned rather than pursue this course. Some did so; others, like Pétain, pretended to be powerless or not to know what was going on; but Laval continued, upheld by his overweening self-confidence. He had no illusion about the stakes for which he was playing. 'If I succeed, there will not be enough stones in this country to raise up statues to me. If I fail, I shall be shot.'

For the moment the tension seemed to have relaxed. The Germans kept their part of the bargain and by late autumn the prisoners exchanged for the workers of the *relève* were beginning to return to France. (In August there was an unexpected bonus: 340 prisoners from the Dieppe region were released on Hitler's orders as a mark of his gratitude for the lack of support by the Dieppoise during the magnificent but costly Canadian raid on the 19th.) But the incalculable factors with which Laval's policy had to cope included the Allies as well as the Germans, North Africa as well as France.

[3]

THE BULK OF the population of North Africa at the time of the armistice counted itself fortunate at having escaped German occupation and desired nothing more than to be left in peace; but, as the German attitude hardened during 1941, at least two groups became active in Algeria. One aimed simply at building up sufficient strength to resist the Germans if they attempted to

invade North Africa; the other planned to re-open the war against Germany and use North Africa as a launching platform for the invasion of France.

The first group was composed of military men; the second of right-wing civilians. Both groups made contact with the Americans and had conversations with Robert Murphy, the American Consul-General, who had signed the Murphy-Weygand agreement in 1941 and was in control of the team of American consular officials who were busy on intelligence work throughout French North Africa.

In June 1942 Roosevelt sent a special representative to discuss American help for a North African rising. The right-wing civilians, who called themselves the 'Group of Five', had recruited to their cause the Generals commanding the districts of Casablanca and Bone and were shortly to add the General in command at Algiers. They had also approached Giraud, who had agreed with them, and with the Americans, to take command of the insurgent forces.

Because they distrusted the ability of the Five to keep the secret, the Americans practised wholesale deception on them throughout the negotiations, and even misled them on important points which were not primarily matters of security. The Five insisted that the rising should be a purely French action, to which the Americans would contribute arms and supplies and perhaps some auxiliary troops. They also insisted that the armed forces should be commanded by a French general and that no British troops should be allowed to take part.

The Americans, however, made plans for a joint Anglo-American operation under the supreme command of General Eisenhower. They did not deliver arms to the groups organised by the Five and, in September, Roosevelt instructed Murphy not to inform the Five of the date of the landing until twenty-four hours in advance.

At the beginning of November the Five were told that 'Operation Torch' would begin within a week. In a mood of fury and consternation, they desperately tried to bring to readiness their plans for neutralising opposition from the civil administration and those elements of the army and navy whose

support was doubtful. Giraud, hurriedly summoned from France, was prevented for twenty-four hours by rough weather from boarding the British submarine that had been sent to fetch him at Le Lavandou. He then insisted on being taken to Gibraltar to argue his claims to supreme command with Eisenhower, and consequently arrived in Algeria after the landings had taken place.

A few hours after Giraud's departure in the submarine, Darlan also left France for North Africa, having received news that his son, Alain, was gravely ill with poliomyelitis. Both Darlan and General Juin had made approaches to Murphy the month before but had been fobbed off with the reply that no American landing was likely for a considerable time, and then only at the request of the Vichy Government. Darlan's son's illness was genuine, and it was pure chance that he should be in Algiers when the invasion force arrived – and that the Governor-General, Yves Chatel, should be in Vichy.

The landings began in the early hours of 8 November with almost every form of classical military ineptitude. At Oran one of the conspirators approached the wrong general and found himself in close arrest and all the pro-Vichy elements alerted. At Casablanca the Americans deferred their landing from 2 a.m. until 5 a.m. without notifying General Béthouart, who commanded the troops and was to lead the rising. Béthouart drove out to Rabat at midnight to inform General Noguès, Governor-General of Morocco, of the insurrection and invite him to join it. Noguès refused to serve under Giraud and was placed under close arrest by Béthouart, who failed to notice that Noguès had been locked in a room where he had a private telephone, on which he proceeded to call Admiral Michelier and order him to resist the landings.

In Algiers the conspirators had by 2 a.m. arrested the senior pro-Vichy officers and taken possession of the prefecture, the police headquarters and the central post office. But the landing forces were an hour late when they got ashore at Sidi Ferruch and could not reach Algiers before the conspirators had in turn been rounded up by the *Garde Mobile*.

The landing which was to have supported a popular rising had

now developed into a fiercely contested invasion. In Juin's Villa des Oliviers, Murphy was trying to persuade the astonished Darlan to give orders for the invaders to be received as friends. During the first part of the conversation a band of resistants surrounded the villa to ensure that Darlan did not escape; during the second part, when they had been driven off by *gardes mobiles*, it was Murphy who was virtually under arrest.

Darlan paced up and down the room in a rage at not having been let into the secret. 'I didn't think the Americans were such big fools as the British. I see I was mistaken.' Eventually he made up his mind: 'I have taken an oath to the Marshal and for two years I have urged my sailors and the country to stand united behind him. I cannot go back on my oath.' At Murphy's urgent pleadings, he agreed to send a telegram to the Marshal, asking for instructions. It was received at Vichy about 8.30 a.m. on 8 November.

At 2 a.m. that morning Laval was wakened by a telephone call from Vichy to tell him that the invasion had begun. At 3 a.m. there was a call from Krug von Nidda, offering support from the German aircraft based on Sardinia and Sicily (a similar offer had already been made to Darlan). Laval said that he could give no reply until the military commanders in Africa had been consulted.

He drove into Vichy, arriving at the Hôtel du Parc about 4 a.m., and immediately went into conference with Bousquet, Rochat and General Revers, Darlan's chief-of-staff at the Ministry of Defence. The air was full of broadcast messages: from Roosevelt to the people of France and to Pétain, from Eisenhower to the people of North Africa. Cables from Tunis, Algiers and Casablanca announced that the admirals commanding the French forces were determined to defend their posts.

While a draft reply to Roosevelt's message was being prepared, Laval telephoned de Brinon in Paris and told him to keep in touch with Abetz. It was evident that the Germans would now press for full military co-operation with France and would probably invade the southern zone to protect the Mediterranean seaboard. Laval had to find a way of preventing France being involved in the war without losing Hitler's confidence.

At 7 a.m. Pétain was called by Ménétrel and told of what had happened. He signed the draft reply to Roosevelt: 'I have learned with astonishment and sadness of the aggression of your troops against North Africa. . . . You invoke pretexts which are in no way justified. . . . France and her honour are at stake. We are attacked; we shall defend ourselves. That is the order that I have given.'

In fact, his order was much less clear. When Darlan's telegram arrived an hour or so later, Pétain replied very cautiously: 'I am very happy that you are on the spot. You may take action and keep me informed. You know that you have my full confidence.'

Laval sent orders to the colonial governors, telling them that their duty was to resist and then received two more notes from the Germans: the first demanded that Vichy should break off diplomatic relations with the United States, the second repeated the demand that she should accept German air support. Darlan had now replied to the second point and said that he was willing to accept air support and asked that the German planes should attack the Allied shipping off Algiers.

At the eleven o'clock Council of Ministers, Laval supported Darlan's decision. He maintained that to admit the German air force into North Africa was to 'call down the thunder', but to make use of them from their own bases was a satisfactory compromise. Pressed by Admiral Auphan, he agreed that the shelling by the American fleet of the French fleet in Casablanca was as bad as the British attack at Mers-el-Kebir and should have the same reply: France would break off diplomatic relations with the United States.

By 2 p.m. the Germans were asking to be allowed to send liaison officers to North Africa and to be given the use of airfields in Tunisia and the department of Constantine. By ten to three the inevitable question arrived from the Führer's headquarters:

'Chancellor Hitler asks the French Government whether it is prepared to fight at his side against the Anglo-Saxons. In the face of the Anglo-Saxon aggression the rupture of diplomatic relations cannot be considered sufficient and it is necessary to proceed to a declaration of war against the British and the

Americans. If the French Government takes up so clear a position, Germany is prepared to march beside her through thick and thin.'

Laval consulted Pétain, who agreed that they should maintain a firm refusal. At 7.30 in the evening Krug von Nidda called on Laval and told him that the Führer wished to see him the following day in Munich.

Laval was late in returning to Chateldon and spent a disturbed night. At eleven the Germans again asked for the use of the Tunisian and Algerian airfields. At midnight Wehrmacht Supreme Headquarters issued an ultimatum. 'In limiting the scope of its offer, the French Government appears unwilling to resist the American attack to the required degree. O.K.W. expects to receive within one hour the French Government's agreement for the basing of aeroplanes on Constantine and Tunisia. If that agreement does not arrive within the stated time, the O.K.W. will take such steps as it deems necessary.' A quarter of an hour later, Laval gave his assent.

The following morning he set off for Dijon, where he was to meet Abetz, in a very dismal frame of mind. Before leaving Vichy he learned that Darlan had signed a cease-fire that covered the town of Algiers and was now discussing armistice terms with the Americans. Laval begged the Marshal to telegraph Darlan and order him not to take any decisive step that would reduce Laval's bargaining powers during his interview with Hitler.

His plans were crumpling under pressure from all sides. Contact had been broken off with the Americans, and French forces were stubbornly fighting them in Oran and Casablanca. The Germans had asked for full military collaboration and he had refused it. He, the negotiator, the conciliator, was at odds with both sides. He had long known the danger he might have to face from the French. Now he wondered what fate the Germans might have in store for him. In the lining of his overcoat he carried an ampoule of cyanide.

Abetz was doleful, and became more doleful still when he realised that Laval was determined to refuse military co-operation with Germany. Abetz feared that he would be held responsible for this 'betrayal'. He warned Laval that Hitler

would claim that this was a breach of the armistice and that the consequences would be dire.

'I have always been against war,' Laval answered. 'I didn't want the war against Germany. And I'm no more inclined today to declare war against the Anglo-Saxons and the Russians.'

In the Black Forest they were held up by a snow-storm and then by mist. The interview with Hitler had been arranged for 11 p.m. but it was not until five o'clock the next morning that, drowsy and shivering, they arrived at their hotel and were told that the Führer would see Laval at 8 p.m.

They did not get much sleep. At midday Laval had a preliminary talk with Ribbentrop and let him know that he was not prepared to agree to the German demand. Early in the afternoon Abetz brought him a report from a German monitoring post, and he was startled and horrified to learn that Darlan had come to an agreement with the Americans and ordered a cease-fire throughout North Africa.

Darlan had spun out the negotiations, but on 10 November had been confronted with the news that Giraud had made a belated arrival on the airfield at Blida. At 10 a.m. General Mark Clark had seen both Darlan and Juin and told Darlan that he wanted an immediate signature. Darlan said that he could not act without consulting the Marshal. Clark said that Vichy had broken off diplomatic relations with the United States forty-eight hours before.

Clark added that, if Darlan would not sign, he would ask Giraud to do so. Darlan replied that the armed forces would not obey Giraud. At this point Juin, who did not care for the idea of serving under Giraud, warned Darlan that the Marshal might at any moment send a message disowning Darlan for having signed the Algiers cease-fire. In that case, Darlan would not represent anybody and the Americans would certainly sign with Giraud. Darlan signed.

Laval found the ground cut from under his feet. His immediate bargaining counter – the possibility of continued French resistance in North Africa – was gone. At any moment he might hear that Darlan had summoned the French fleet in Toulon to rally to him (an order that Darlan in fact gave a few days later,

but which was disobeyed because the French navy refused to join the 'British assassins of Mers-el-Kebir' and the Americans who had sunk thirteen French ships and killed more than a thousand men at Casablanca).

Laval telephoned his office at Vichy and, over a line that was tapped by the Germans and crackling with electricity, told Rochat to get in touch with Pétain immediately, to tell him that he had not yet seen Hitler, that Darlan's order to cease fire had ruined everything, and that he would resign if the Marshal took any steps to negotiate with the Americans before he returned to Vichy.

Throughout the morning the Marshal had been besieged by visitors, some urging him to defend North Africa against the Anglo-Saxon invaders, others proposing that he should fly to Algiers and take command of the French forces. When Rochat brought Laval's message, Weygand, who had favoured resistance, said: 'Darlan is a traitor. You can shoot him; but you cannot revoke the order to cease fire just to please Monsieur Laval and assist his policy of sailing against the tide. It's a military impossibility: you can't resume the fight after an order to stop it.'

The Marshal was not so solicitous of military scruples as the General. At ten minutes to three he broadcast: 'I have given the order for defence against the aggressor. I maintain that order.' Twenty-five minutes later he announced that he had taken command of all armed forces, by land, sea and air. The resumption of military command seemed to rejuvenate him.

Laval, meanwhile, was at last having his interview with Hitler, who was supported by Göring, Ribbentrop and Ciano, the latter deputising for his father-in-law, Mussolini, who was too tired and depressed to come. Hitler had already told Ciano that his mind was made up: France and Corsica were to be occupied by German and Italian troops, together with Tunisia. He was still fascinated by Giraud 'who has brains and courage' and was convinced that the French forces would rally to him. The Axis Powers must act at once.

Laval, unaware of any of this, was pleasantly surprised that

Hitler made no mention of French military collaboration and assumed that both Abetz and Ribbentrop had told the Führer that there was no point in arguing. Hitler began with an harangue in which Laval caught the name Giraud repeated many times and in which Hitler raged against all the deceptions that the French had practised on him. Since this part of the conversation was not translated, Laval was not obliged to reply. But Hitler's next words, which were translated, required an answer: would France arrange facilities for German troops to be landed in Tunisia?

Laval asked what guarantees Germany would offer for the integrity of the French Empire. According to Laval, Ciano then began to argue about Italy's claims in Tunisia and Laval shouted him down. According to Ciano, Hitler dismissed the point without giving him time to reply.

Laval's version is probably the more reliable, if only because Ciano went out of his way to find salve for his injured pride by recording in his diary that night that 'Laval, with his white tie and middle-class French clothes, was very much out of place in the great salon among so many uniforms', a comment that he was to contradict six weeks later when, at a meeting at the Führer's headquarters in the forest of Görlitz, he acidly commented: 'How the Germans respond to the charm of the French! Even of this Frenchman. Except for Hitler, all the others were crowding round trying to talk to him, or to get close to him; it looked like the entrance of an erstwhile great lord into a circle of new-rich parvenus.'

Hitler repeated his demand for French co-operation in Tunisia. Laval, determined not to come to any agreement that might have the appearance of a military treaty, refused to commit himself. If the Germans insisted, he could not prevent them; they could simply send a note to Vichy informing the French Government of what they had done.

The threat to occupy the free zone had not been made and he went off contentedly to an adjoining room to smoke a long-awaited cigarette, a luxury as forbidden in the Führer's presence as in the Marshal's. He was called back for a final word with Hitler, now attended only by Ribbentrop. He commented that

collaboration seemed to be a rather one-way business, but Hitler interrupted: 'Yes, from Germany to France. The French and Germans must march together, and then I shall beat the English.'

Laval took the opportunity to turn the conversation and say how much he wished the Germans to beat the Bolsheviks, and Hitler, fixing him with a warm and earnest eye and grasping both his hands, declared: 'I ardently desire an understanding with France.' While Laval had been smoking his cigarette, the Führer had given orders for the Wehrmacht to cross the demarkation line at dawn.

At four o'clock in the morning, the telephone rang in Laval's hotel bedroom. It was Abetz, saying that he must see him urgently. When he arrived a few minutes later, he told Laval that the Germans were crossing into the unoccupied zone and – the ultimate humiliation – the Italians were moving to take over Nice and Corsica. Laval raged and argued and finally obtained assurances that the refugees from Alsace-Lorraine, the eighty thousand escaped prisoners of war, and the 650,000 prisoners on leave in the southern zone should not be interfered with. He looked a broken man when he climbed into the aeroplane at eleven that morning to return to Vichy.

He arrived at the Hôtel du Parc at 2 p.m. The German announcement of the occupation of the southern zone had reached Rochat at 5.30 a.m. and he had taken it to the Marshal, who had told him to draw up a protest. The document, which Pétain accepted without correction, said: 'During the night I have received a letter from the Führer informing me that for reasons of military necessity he has been obliged to take measures whose effect is in fact to abolish the primary and fundamental premises of the armistice. I solemnly protest against this decision, which is incompatible with the armistice convention.'

This protest was broadcast and followed by an appeal by Pétain to the French people: 'These have been the darkest days of my life; the situation today recalls to me the unhappy memories of 1940. In sorrow I salute the soldiers, sailors and airmen who are falling for the honour of the Empire and the preservation of the country. Have confidence in your Marshal, who thinks only of France.'

The sympathy which welled up around the upright old soldier might perhaps have been modified if his admirers had known what they – and the rest of the world – were not to learn until the Marshal stood trial nearly three years later (though Darlan hinted at it on several occasions). The old gentleman had again been taking out some reinsurance. Only six people were in the secret: in Vichy, Admiral Auphan, Commander Joannin, Bernard Ménétrél and Jean Jardel, the man who had succeeded Du Moulin; in Algiers, Admiral Battet and Darlan.

At the signing of the armistice all French secret codes had been handed over to the Germans, but Darlan had concocted one for his personal use which he revealed only to Joannin and Battet. Early on 10 November, when appeals and denunciations were flashing backwards and forwards between Pétain and Darlan, Joannin told Auphan of the code and Auphan informed the Marshal, who at once saw an opportunity of covering himself against an American victory in North Africa while keeping in with the Germans in France.

Immediately after denouncing Darlan and broadcasting the statement that he had 'given the order for defence against the aggressor. I maintain that order', Pétain had given Auphan a message to be transmitted to Darlan in the secret code. It said: 'You have my complete confidence. Do your best. I entrust you with the interests of the Empire.'

Darlan had replied to the first, official telegram: 'Your message received. I cancel my order and am handing myself over as a prisoner' (which he did not do). When he received the Marshal's secret message, he replied, in the same code: 'I understand and am happy.'

The Marshal thereupon officially announced that, Darlan having disobeyed his instructions, General Noguès would in future represent him in North Africa; but immediately afterwards he told Auphan to telegraph to Darlan telling him that he still retained Pétain's confidence and 'the Marshal's decision [to appoint Noguès] has been taken only because Admiral Darlan is a prisoner'. Eventually Noguès signed an armistice with the Americans in Morocco and handed over his powers to Darlan.

There would have been many elements of high comedy and low farce in the Marshal's game had it not been played with human lives and reputations. In the battle between the French and the Anglo-American forces, three thousand men had been killed or wounded on each side; French commanders, unable to decide whether their allegiance lay to the Marshal or Darlan or Noguès (both of whom claimed to represent the true views of Pétain, who was a prisoner), found themselves taking first one side and then the other. At the end of the war, those who had chosen the wrong side found themselves receiving sentences of life imprisonment or twenty years' hard labour from a Government which did not even exist at the time of their alleged offences.

The agony of the French armed forces reached its climax on 27 November. At half-past three in the morning, Krug von Nidda telephoned Rochat and asked him to accompany him to Chateldon: he had an important communication to deliver to Laval. They arrived soon after four and waited in the cold and darkness until 4.30, the time at which Nidda had been ordered to deliver the message. Then they knocked at the door of the château and Laval was given a copy of the letter that Hitler had written to Pétain. It announced that the German army was occupying Toulon in order to prevent the French fleet from leaving, and was also demobilising the French army.

Laval arrived in Vichy three-quarters of an hour later. The Naval Chief of Staff had just received a telephone call from Toulon, saying that the Germans had invaded the dock area and the navy, in accordance with the promise it had made that its ships should never fall into German hands, had begun to scuttle them: the seacocks were open and machinery was being destroyed. Five submarines slipped past the line of mines that the Germans had laid at the harbour entrance and three of them reached Algiers. The remaining seventy-three vessels were sunk. The remnants of the French army, which had never reached the figure of 100,000 men allowed it under the armistice, were rounded up in their barracks and disarmed.

France had no army, no fleet, almost no Empire. and was totally occupied by German troops. Laval stubbornly set about picking up the pieces.

HIS FAMILY ONCE more begged him to resign; and on the day after his return from Munich, exasperated by the Marshal's hesitations and inexplicable behaviour, he had indeed offered his resignation, but the old man pretended not to hear and Laval soon conquered his rage and returned to his desk. He still believed that there must ultimately be a peace of compromise. 'Before the Americans came in,' he said, 'there were three possibilities: a total German victory; a total Anglo-Russian victory; or a negotiated peace. Hitler will never get to Washington to dictate terms, so there are now only the last two – and I cannot believe that the Americans will be so mad as to insist on the total defeat of Germany which will let Bolshevism spread over Europe.'

Whether France was at all in the game as a physical force was doubtful, despite the fact that both Darlan and Noguès had repeated that they were acting in North Africa in the name of the Marshal. De Gaulle might get for France some grateful concessions from the Allies, but could not act as negotiator. There remained only France's moral strength – an unexpected factor to be associated with Laval – and this she could retain only if she preserved her independence from German rule. So the problem remained the same as always: how to preserve the status of a free and legal Government for Vichy.

The Germans had said that they were not occupying the southern zone but using it as a field of military operations, but the succession of demands which they poured in during November made it clear that they were paying only lip-service to the concept of Vichy 'freedom', and they openly threatened to suppress the Government if it did not do as it was told.

Under pressure Pétain again denounced Darlan and ordered the French troops not to fire on the Germans; but Abetz was still sending messengers from Paris, warning Laval that France must expect the worst if she refused to declare war on the Americans. Laval, racking his brains for a formula that would satisfy the Germans without committing France to war, at first considered

offering to join the Anti-Comintern Pact, but rejected that as too dangerous. He then told de Brinon to inform Abetz that he thought he had hit on the solution: France would simply 'take note of the existence of a state of war' with America.

Meanwhile, he had been reproaching the Marshal for his lack of decision and complained that they would be in even more serious trouble unless Pétain agreed to make up his mind on the answers to pressing problems. He asked if the Marshal was willing to let him take over all responsibility. Pétain agreed. He announced to the nation:

'In present circumstances, which demand immediate decisions at all hours and in all places, I cannot personally carry out all the tasks that are imposed on the Government. I invest President Laval with the right to command and take action. I know his patriotism and clear-sightedness. He knows how to handle responsibility. Frenchmen! I remain with you. I continue to embody the sovereignty and continuity of the nation.'

Constitutional Act No. 12 decreed that: 'Except for constitutional laws, the Head of the Government is empowered to promulgate laws and decrees under his own signature.' Laval explained to the Council of Ministers that in his opinion a declaration of war would be 'useless and dangerous and unconstitutional. We shall not make it. But I have rejected an important German demand. I must give them some compensation, and this compensation is that I should take over supreme power.'

The Minister of Justice reported to Laval that there could be no distinction in law between 'taking note of the existence of a state of war' and actually declaring it; and, under Constitutional Act No. 2, the Marshal could not declare war without the previous assent of the National Assembly. This destroyed one of Laval's plans, but provided him with a new pretext. When the Germans repeated that unless France, within twenty-four hours, declared war on America and formed an 'imperial legion' to fight in North Africa, they would impose a military Government like that of Poland, Laval rather impertinently drew Ribbentrop's attention to Constitutional Act No. 2 and asked if he would like him to summon the National Assembly.

The publication of the new Constitutional Act persuaded the Germans to hold their hand – together, probably, with the fact that they did not want to spare troops from the Eastern Front to supplement those in France. But heads were to fall, and the first was that of Abetz. Ribbentrop, on 19 November, ordered him to cease all negotiations with the Vichy Government and to return to Berlin.

From Paris, Achenbach and de Brinon continued the pressure, but Laval answered that the farthest he was prepared to go was to invite volunteers for the ‘imperial legion’. He did this in a broadcast on 20 November, attacking the Americans for aggression in North Africa and proclaiming: ‘France does not admit defeat. The day will come when the French flag will float alone over Algiers.’

In private he was not so confident. To Jacques Barnaud, one of three Ministers who had submitted their resignations, he said: ‘I am gambling on the assumption that Germany will win the war. Will the Germans win the war? I have no idea: I’m not a fortune-teller. The longer it goes on, the less I believe it. But I don’t consider that a double game in politics is of any use.

‘There are two men who can render a service to their country: de Gaulle and myself.

‘If the Germans are going to win the war, or arrange a compromise peace, we must deal with them honestly and without trickery: then perhaps I shall still be able to be of service to my country and argue with the Germans for an honourable peace treaty.

‘If the Germans are beaten, de Gaulle will come back. I have no illusions: eighty per cent or ninety per cent of the population will be for him, and I shall be hanged. Why should that worry me? There are two men at this moment who can save our country, and if I were not Laval I should wish to be de Gaulle.’

But dealing with the Germans ‘honestly and without trickery’ did not mean without driving as hard a bargain as possible. The Germans asked for the surrender of the remainder of the French merchant fleet in the Mediterranean and Laval leaped at the chance to re-open discussions.

‘The French Government,’ he wrote to Hitler, ‘finds in this an

opportunity to mark its readiness to take part in the gigantic struggle which you are waging. . . . I hope the moment is near when I can determine with you the basis of the action which France intends to take at your side for the reconquest of North Africa. . . . Moral and political conditions for that action must be created in France. They will result, I am sure, from an interview which I ask of you and which I hope will be soon.' He had a reply from Ribbentrop, thanking him but making no mention of a meeting, and it was not until 19 December that he again saw Hitler, this time at his headquarters in the forest of Görlitz.

It was not a conference but an arraignment. Hitler began with a tirade about German victories and the eventual German triumph: delivered with more than usual ferocity because the Americans were successfully attacking the Japanese in the Pacific, the British were driving Rommel back in Tripoli, von Paulus's Sixth Army was retiring before the Russian onslaught at Stalingrad. He complained of the hidden stocks of arms that the Gestapo had found in France and of the treachery of Darlan and Giraud; he demanded once more that the French police should be re-organised under pro-Nazi control.

Laval protested that, eager though he was to help the Germans, their exactions were undermining his authority. 'What do you expect me to do? Everywhere I turn, I hear shouts of "Laval to the gallows!"' Hitler shouted him down, told him that Sauckel would shortly be returning to Paris and that the Vichy Government must see that he obtained all the workers he needed.

'You are the last Government of France. After you, it will be a *gauleiter*.' He calmed down towards the end, gripped both of Laval's hands and, as at Munich, said: 'We will always understand each other.' Within a few days he had given instructions to Speer, the Minister of Production, that 'in future there is no need to have any special consideration for the French'.

Sauckel arrived in Paris on 11 January and on the 14th told Laval that he required 150,000 skilled workers and 100,000 labourers before the middle of March. To encourage Vichy to begin collaborating quickly he organised round-ups of civilians as they emerged from cinemas and metro stations. On 17 February Laval announced the call-up for compulsory labour service of all

men born between 1 January 1920 and 31 December 1922. In return, the Germans agreed to restore the departments of the Nord and the Pas de Calais; to abolish the demarkation line; to allow free communications throughout France; and to transform all French prisoners into paid workers with the right to spend leave at home in France.

It was with the series of battles with Sauckel which now began that Laval's attitude towards the Germans underwent a radical change. Until now, the *relève* had served three purposes: it had provided Germany with an assurance of the French desire to collaborate; it had given work to many Frenchmen who might otherwise have been unemployed; it had helped Germany to withstand the Russians. But in the face of the exorbitant demands that were presented during 1943 Laval procrastinated, obstructed and finally flatly refused to co-operate. He also relied more than ever on the help of the public officials whom he had formerly despised.

'Sauckel asks for actions, I'll give him decrees on paper,' he said. On his return to power he had set about reinstating the prefects who had been dismissed under the Darlan Government to make way for military men and nominees of the Marshal's advisers. He also instituted regular meetings in Paris and Vichy at which he could talk with them and drop hints that the decrees he issued should be interpreted 'paternally'. 'The occupying forces read the lines; it is your job to read between the lines.' It was a dangerous burden that he placed upon them and, although he promised to cover them, he was not always able to do so.

The first batch of workers sent to Germany was almost up to strength. Since 1941 the Germans had asked for a total of 650,000 men and had received, officially, about 500,000, of whom some had never existed except on paper and others had not returned after their first leave. Laval considered that his good faith had been sufficiently demonstrated and at the end of April he asked for, and was granted, his fifth and final interview with Hitler. In addition to asking for more food for France and a diminution of the demand for workers, he intended to test Hitler's reactions to a suggestion for a compromise peace.

He flew to Salzburg in Hitler's personal plane and was greeted

with tricolour ribbons on the car that took him to his hotel and blue and white and red flowers in his bedroom. Schleier, the German Minister in Paris, drove with him up the mountain roads to Hitler's chalet at Berchtesgaden, where the temperature noticeably dropped. The Führer launched into his usual angry monologue, blaming the French for having declared war, accusing them of bad faith since the armistice.

The repetition of 'Giraud' at the previous interview was now succeeded by the repetition of '13 December'. He repeated the date so often and with such venom that Laval at last interrupted: 'But, *Herr Reichskanzler*, on 13 December I was there! I was the victim!' Hitler paid no attention and ended with the familiar threat that he was not worried about France: one *gauleiter* in the German zone and one in the Italian and the problem was solved.

He proclaimed his conviction of ultimate victory, admitted that there had been reverses on the Russian front but claimed that these had now been revenged and, in addition to his successes in the submarine warfare, he had secret weapons which he would soon be bringing into use. Laval raised the question of the future of Europe. Was not this the time for Germany to define her war aims? Then the Anglo-Saxons would be compelled to define their own. (He did not believe that Roosevelt had been serious in using the expression 'unconditional surrender' in his talks with the Press after the Casablanca conference in January.)

But Hitler would not negotiate except from a position of strength. He had accepted Roosevelt's challenge and would fight to the end. Laval suggested that the Russians, who had already changed sides twice, might be ready to change again, or at least to agree to a compromise that would keep them out of Europe. Would Hitler consider negotiations with Stalin?

'Impossible,' Hitler replied. 'What I need is ten thousand aeroplanes and twenty thousand tanks.'

'A statement in fifteen lines would be worth twenty thousand aeroplanes and forty thousand tanks,' Laval replied. Then, with a grin that did not hide the seriousness of his proposal: 'You should make me your secretary; give me a little corner somewhere and I'll write it for you.'

The meeting ended with Laval having received no satisfaction: no hope of negotiations for peace; no hope of more food; no hope of a relaxation in the demands for workers. In his public statements he supported Germany's fight against 'the Anglo-Bolsheviks', in which he believed, and the compulsory labour service, which he was trying to sabotage. Conscious of the hatred which his utterances were building up against him, he dropped hints of his real purpose to the people who called at his office or to the small gatherings of teachers, public officials and returned prisoners whom he addressed from time to time. It was a tight-rope on which he scarcely preserved his balance and from which those working for him often tumbled.

Paul Creyssel, a member of the Vichy propaganda department, spoke on the wireless to the workers bound for Germany and told them: 'I swear to you that you have been defended at Vichy.' Laval rebuked him: 'If you tell the French that I am defending them, you diminish my chances of defending them.'

Addressing the mayors of Le Cantal, in a more than usually expansive mood because they too were Auvergnats, Laval said: 'Yesterday I was in Paris. I had talks with the Germans. They went on late into the night and they were not easy, those talks. They are never easy. You see, every day I try to do the maximum so that we shall suffer the minimum of harm and, when evening comes, I often have the feeling of being gripped between the two arms of a pair of pincers, and sometimes I wonder sadly which arm – the German or the French – has made me suffer most that day. But I never lose heart, for I have one ambition, one aim, one only, towards which I make my way like a sleepwalker: to try to do everything to save our country by reducing its suffering each day, to act so that the soil which belongs to the fathers shall still remain for their children and that it shall always be called the soil of France.'

If he had any lingering doubts about his unpopularity, he was soon to receive proof. On 30 July a bomb was exploded in his printing works at Clermont-Ferrand, wrecking a rotary press but not injuring anybody (it was a Saturday afternoon). Seven weeks later he was almost blown up in his car, a bullet-proof

limousine that had been made for the Queen when she visited Paris with George VI in 1938.

On his daily journeys into Vichy he was escorted by two police cars and the position of his own car in the little procession was frequently changed; but the route was always the same: the road that he had taken as a boy in the carrier cart to Route Nationale No. 106 and then northward past the Gare de Ris and Saint-Yonne to Vichy, the road running close to the railway line for much of its length.

On the night of 17 September Laval was late in returning from Vichy and, just before his car was due to pass, a railway worker, walking home along the line because his bicycle lamp had failed, stumbled over a wire. One end led to a detonating box behind the railway embankment; the other end led to seventy-five pounds of melinite, hidden in a pile of sand at the side of the road. By the time Laval's detectives had got out of the cars and begun to search the area, whoever had been sitting beside the detonating box had disappeared.

Laval arrived at Chateldon unperturbed. When the miller stopped him on the way up to the château to chide him and say that only the previous evening the villagers had been discussing the possibility of an attempt on his life, Laval grinned and wagged his finger at him: 'Oh, so you knew all about it last night, did you? We'll have to look into this.'

To the railwayman he presented ten thousand francs and a few packets of rationed tobacco. When somebody suggested that the reward was very much on the meagre side, he answered: 'It's more than most people think I'm worth.' For the railwayman the discussion proved to be purely academic: at the Liberation he had the money taken from him and narrowly escaped being put in prison.

Some time later Laval's car was machine-gunned by British aeroplanes on the road from Paris to Vichy, but he had noticed a cracked mirror before he set out and had decided to go by train instead. A month afterwards there was an attempt to blow up his train, but he was forewarned and went by car. But, unless some unfavourable augury appeared, he continued to stroll quite unconcernedly about the village and up the hill to inspect the

bottling works, the sawmill and the farms where, at the end of August, he spent a whole day threshing corn and bragged that he had a yield of twenty hundredweight to the acre.

After the attempt to blow up his car, his wife insisted on accompanying him on many of his longer journeys, often with unexpected results, since she was neither able nor willing to conceal her dislike of the Germans. One day in the station at Nevers, where the prefect used to meet Laval for discussions, a trainful of German soldiers drew up on another line. Recognising the white tie and dark face, they waved a cheerful greeting to Laval and were astonished to see Mme Laval return it with a furious shake of her fist. Laval remained impassive but inwardly delighted. Despite their arguments in private about his stubbornness in remaining in office, they were devoted to each other and, in the eyes of the villagers of Chateldon, 'like young lovers of eighteen'.

His relations with the Germans worsened as their demands grew more insistent and his opposition became more clear. Schellenberg, the S.S. Chief of Staff, had reported to Hitler at the end of 1942 that 'we have reasons to doubt whether Laval is entirely willing to collaborate with the Germans'. By August 1943 Geissler, commanding the S.S. in Vichy, told Knochen in Paris that 'we have the impression that Laval is seeking by every means to prevent the promulgation of the law, or at least to delay it'.

The law in question had been drawn up by Darquier de Pellepoix in agreement with the Germans and deprived all Jews naturalised since 1927, together with their wives and children, of French nationality, thus making them liable to deportation to Germany. Laval at first pretended to be too busy to discuss the law with Darquier and then got rid of him; but the S.S. in Paris kept up the pressure on Darquier's successor.

In July an S.S. deputation arrived in Vichy for an interview with Laval. In Paris they had been assured a month ago that the law had been sent to Vichy and that Laval had signed it. Yet it had not been promulgated in the *Journal Officiel*. What had happened to it?

Laval made a lengthy search of his desk and at last produced the

document from a drawer. He showed it to them to prove that he had indeed signed it. 'But,' he added, 'in signing it I unwittingly committed an abuse of my powers. This, gentlemen, falls under the statute of persons. It is therefore the concern not of the Head of Government, but of the Head of State; and you are aware how jealous the Marshal is of his prerogatives relating to constitutional matters. But, of course, in the case in point, this is a simple formality. It will be dealt with at the next Council of Ministers.'

Some days later the S.S. again asked what progress was being made with promulgating the law. Laval expressed his regrets and explained that the Council of Ministers had been compelled to advise the Marshal that collective denationalisation would be a breach of the constitution: each case would have to be examined separately.

These tactics had less success with Sauckel. 'Göring is a lion, and you can argue with a lion,' Laval said. 'But Sauckel is an iron bar. How can you argue with an iron bar?' Nevertheless, he argued.

There was now little unemployment in France and the transfer of further workers to Germany would lead to the closing down of French factories and increased opportunities for the Germans to requisition factory machinery. Sauckel complained that, of 715,000 men liable for call-up, 52,000 had been declared medically unfit and 418,000 belonged to the various reserved (and artificially swollen) occupations: miners, agricultural labourers, railwaymen, police and so on. Of the remainder, many had disappeared from their homes and taken refuge in the mountains, forming the armed guerilla bands that were to be known as the *maquis*.

At the same time Laval's Minister of Production, Bichelonne, was reaching an agreement with Speer for French factories to be given larger orders from Germany, one of his arguments being that French factories were less liable to interference from Allied bombing. All the workers in these 'S' factories – which Sauckel bitterly referred to as 'Speer's unofficial *maquis*' – were protected from call-up.

In July Sauckel demanded a further 500,000 workers for Germany and 1,000,000 for German projects in France. Laval

flew to see him in Paris on 6 August and refused to allow any more workers to leave for Germany. The ensuing row went on for six hours and at the end of it Laval had a mild heart-attack. He called a Council of Ministers which endorsed his stand.

De Brinon, the principal Nazi spy within the Government, reported to Geissler that 'Laval is absolutely opposed to sending even a single new French worker to Germany'. Geissler sent the information to Knochen, who passed it on to Sauckel. It was attached to Sauckel's report to Hitler, in which he complained that: 'The President of the Council was unable to furnish any really solid reasons to justify his refusal. He even declared impracticable the proposition I made to him that he should at least try to make the greatest possible efforts to achieve this end.'

He also attached a copy of a letter to Schleier, in which he was even more outspoken: 'I have completely lost faith in the honesty and good will of the President of the Council. His refusal constitutes a pure and simple sabotage of the struggle for life which Germany has undertaken against Bolshevism. This time, notably by his totally irrelevant and incoherent replies to my clear and precise questions, he has personally made the worst impression imaginable.'

There was no immediate reaction from Hitler, who was pre-occupied with a new Russian counter-attack and the recent fall of Mussolini. The next attack on Laval was to come from Pétain, who had spent many weeks in secret discussions with his staff and was now prepared to strike.

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THE ASTONISHING AGREEMENT between the Allies and Darlan had been greeted with cynical chuckles in France – 'a fine thing when you can't trust even your own traitors' – some grumbles in America, and an outburst of indignation in Britain, where Gaullist propaganda had been busy in the Press. Churchill defended the American decision in a secret session of the Commons, the agitation died down and it soon became clear that

Darlan, although Roosevelt referred to him as a 'temporary expedient', would remain in control in North Africa. All this was immensely comforting to Pétain, who had his official pronouncements to show to the Germans and his secret messages to present to the Allies at a later date.

But the intrigue which preceded and accompanied the landings had not died away. In Algiers the conspirators split into their previous allegiances: Giraudist, Gaullist, royalist. Giraud recognised Darlan as High Commissioner and settled for the post of Commander-in-Chief of the French forces. De Gaulle, prevented by the Americans and British from going to Algeria, busied himself with collecting endorsements from ex-President Beneš, the Russian Ambassador and representatives of the resistance in the southern zone. From Morocco the Comte de Paris, the royalist pretender to the long-vacated throne of France, offered to support anybody who would support him.

He had approached Pétain during a visit to France four months before. Pétain, who did not see room for two kings on his tottery throne, recommended him to talk with Laval. They arranged to meet at a restaurant at Riom and Laval, arriving a few minutes early out of politeness to the royal visitor, was amused to be met at the restaurant door by the manager, who whispered: 'Be careful, Monsieur le Président, they are going to work another 13 December on you. The Comte de Paris has been seen in Vichy.'

The Comte, in answer to Laval's first inquiry, confessed that he preferred to be addressed as *Monseigneur* rather than *Commandant*, the rank he had been granted in the Foreign Legion. He then pointed out that he was thirty-three, had waited eagerly since he came of age twelve years before to be of service to France, and was now willing to relieve Pétain of the cares of office. Laval, who had hoped that he had come to offer his services as an intermediary in peace negotiations, considered the suggestion with due gravity and then told the Comte that, although he was far from being one of his supporters, he felt it his duty to warn him that the time was not propitious for such a move. The country was in too sad a state and the Comte was, frankly, too lacking in political experience.

'If, however, you wish to serve a political apprenticeship, I am

ready to offer you a post in the Government. If you are successful in the post I offer you, I can assure you that within six months you will have all France at your feet. Would you care, Monseigneur, to take over the Ministry of Food?' The Comte returned to Morocco soon afterwards.

In December he went to Algiers, this time with the idea of arranging a partnership between Giraud and de Gaulle, under his auspices. Henri d'Astier de la Vigerie, one of the original Group of Five, introduced him to his brother, General François d'Astier, who arrived on 20 December as the unofficial representative of de Gaulle. François d'Astier talked with the Comte de Paris, with Giraud and with members of other factions and was then, at Darlan's request, ordered out of the country by the Americans, leaving by plane in the morning of 24 December.

At three o'clock that afternoon Darlan drove into the Summer Palace, his headquarters on the hill above Algiers, crossed the courtyard shaded by palm trees, entered the hall and then turned into the dark, narrow corridor that led to his office. As he opened the office door he heard a movement behind him. He swung round and saw a young man with a revolver. The young man, whose name was Olivier Bonnier de la Chapelle, fired one shot that hit the Admiral in the mouth and another that hit him in the chest. Darlan was taken to the Maillot Hospital and died on the operating-table.

Bonnier was taken to the central police station for questioning. In the emotional reaction of the first hour of captivity, he made a statement, naming the members of the group that he was working for. That statement disappeared and was said to have been burnt. On Christmas Day he was tried by court-martial and condemned to death, an announcement that he took with complete calm in the belief that his murder of Darlan was to be followed by a change of Government and he would be reprieved.

During the night he realised that something had gone wrong: there was no commotion in the streets, no news of a take-over. Before he was taken out to be shot in the morning, he asked the prison chaplain for paper on which to write a further confession. The chaplain had no paper and Bonnier wrote a list of names of his accomplices on a visiting card which was said to be

engraved 'Henrid' Astier dela Vigerie'. But that, too, disappeared.

On the day that Bonnier was condemned to death, de Gaulle sent a telegram to Giraud, suggesting that they should meet either in Algiers or in the Tchad, to discuss setting up a provisional central authority. Giraud, who had succeeded Darlan as High Commissioner, did not intend to take any hasty steps. In January Churchill met Roosevelt at Casablanca and tried to convince him that de Gaulle was not such a dangerous, scheming politician as he thought. Roosevelt agreed that de Gaulle should be invited to meet Giraud in Casablanca.

Giraud arrived, but de Gaulle, who had his own methods of negotiation, refused to come. Eventually Churchill sent him a strong telegram, pointing out that his refusal would turn public opinion against him and would ruin Churchill's attempts to patch up his disagreements with Roosevelt. If he did not come, 'the position of His Majesty's Government towards your Movement while you remain at its head will also require to be reviewed. If with your eyes open you reject this unique opportunity we shall endeavour to carry on as well as we can without you. The door is still open.'

De Gaulle stepped inside. On arrival at Casablanca his ill humour was increased by the fact that nobody presented arms to him. At first he refused to call on Giraud in the villa next door but, after further chiding from Churchill, he did so. Giraud was willing to accept the proposal put forward by Churchill and Roosevelt: a triumvirate composed of Giraud, de Gaulle (promoted to the rank of General of the Army to have equal rank with the other two), and Georges (whom the British proposed to fly out of France). De Gaulle turned the suggestion down. After a bitter quarrel with Churchill he agreed to have his photograph taken shaking hands with Giraud, and then flew back to London.

On 13 May the war in North Africa ended. On 15 May de Gaulle received, and immediately published, his trump card. The previous September he had ordered Jean Moulin, one of the great heroes and martyrs of the Resistance, to speed up the work of uniting the scattered Resistance organisations and procuring their support for de Gaulle. The wording of the message that Moulin now sent him can scarcely have come as a surprise to him and

could hardly have been more apt if he had drafted it himself:

'Every movement, every party of the Resistance, from both northern and southern zones, on the eve of General de Gaulle's departure for Algeria, pledges anew its total adherence to the principles he and the National Committee embody and uncompromisingly uphold. . . .

'They declare: (1) that political problems cannot be excluded from these talks; (2) that the French people will never tolerate the subordination of General de Gaulle to General Giraud and demand the instant installation at Algiers of a provisional Government under the presidency of General de Gaulle, with General Giraud as military chief; (3) that General de Gaulle shall remain sole leader of the French Resistance whatever the result of the negotiations.'

To the bewilderment of future historians the first full meeting of the National Council of Resistance, held at 48 Rue du Four, Paris, under the presidency of Jean Moulin, did not take place until 27 May, twelve days after it had sent its message to de Gaulle.

On 17 May Giraud invited de Gaulle to Algiers to form a central authority with him. On 26 May de Gaulle cryptically replied: 'I plan to reach Algiers by the end of this week and shall be delighted to work directly with you in the service of France.'

De Gaulle landed on Boufarik airfield at midnight on 30 May. The following day he had his first meeting, and row, with Giraud. From the first it was evident what the outcome would be: Giraud had none of de Gaulle's political ability or burning ambition; he did not even seem to have the most elementary sense of self-preservation. He agreed to the setting-up of a Committee of Seven, over which both he and de Gaulle would preside, and which was composed of two nominees on his side – Jean Monnet and General Georges – and three on de Gaulle's. It was apparently not until the Committee met that Giraud realised that Monnet was a Gaullist. De Gaulle, with a majority of five to two, set about dismissing Giraud's supporters from the principal administrative posts and substituting his own.

In America the indignation at de Gaulle's manoeuvres grew hotter. Roosevelt accused Churchill of allowing de Gaulle to use

British money to bribe the crew of the *Richelieu* to join his own navy. There were similar allegations of desertions from the French army to de Gaulle's Free French forces in Tunisia, in return for a bounty, higher pay and immediate promotion.

On 19 June Eisenhower sent for de Gaulle and Giraud and told them that, in the midst of his preparations for the Sicily landings, he could not have disruption behind his own lines. It was essential that he should be able to continue to deal directly with Giraud and that Giraud should retain his full military authority.

De Gaulle refused. The deadlock continued until Giraud foolishly left for Washington on 1 July to seek supplies for his poorly-equipped troops. When he returned later in the month, he found that de Gaulle had completed his plans for the reorganisation of the Committee of National Liberation which they had set up on 3 June. Giraud, as Commander-in-Chief, was subordinated to a newly-created Committee for National Defence, of which de Gaulle was chairman.

On 3 September 1943 the Committee of National Liberation passed a resolution 'to assure, as soon as circumstances permit, the operation of justice in regard to Marshal Pétain and to those who have taken or are taking part in the pseudo-Government formed by him, who have capitulated, violated the constitution, handed over French workers to the Germans and compelled French forces to fight against the Allies or against those of the French who were continuing the struggle.'

At the beginning of November de Gaulle reorganised the Committee of National Liberation and got rid of Georges and Giraud, whom he also sacked as Commander-in-Chief six months later. On 3 November he called the first meeting of the Consultative Assembly that he had chosen himself: fifty representatives from the Resistance, twenty from the eighty Members of Parliament who had voted against Pétain in July 1940, twenty from Gaullist supporters in the Empire, ten from Algeria, and twelve Communists. Since the Communists were the largest organised group in the Resistance, he brought two of them on to the Committee itself.

He now had a Government and the semblance of a Parliament, though the Consultative Assembly had not been elected by the

people and had no control over the Government. America and Britain still refused to recognise his Committee as representing the French nation, but on 3 June, three days before the invasion of Europe, the Committee of National Liberation proclaimed itself the Provisional Government of France.

[6]

FROM THE MOMENT of de Gaulle's formation of the National Committee in June 1943, Pétain followed his masterful power-play with increasing anxiety. With the threat of revenge in the pronouncement of 3 September, a small wave of panic passed through Vichy.

The Marshal decided that he must strengthen his position by putting down the resistance and by re-establishing his 'legitimacy'. He had several times complained that Laval was failing to maintain order in the country. The charge was to a certain extent justified, for Laval lacked ruthlessness and, though he urged the police to take action against the terrorist minority in the *maquis*, he regarded the genuine patriots among them with the same eye as his wife who, at a lunch attended by a German Embassy official, delighted the company by remarking: 'Those *maquisards* are a fine lot of boys.'

Pétain suggested that Laval should hand over the Ministry of the Interior to one of his right-wing generals: Bridoux or La Porte du Theil. But Laval refused. Ever since 13 December he had been determined never to lose control of the Ministry of the Interior.

The Marshal then said that he wished to revert to the position that he had held before Laval's return: to be Head of the Government as well as Head of the State. Laval told him bluntly: 'You are no longer young enough to govern. Power would be exercised by your followers – apprentices and idiots. Your Government wouldn't last a week. After that we should have Doriot or a *gauleiter*: in both cases civil war, and in the first case just plain war.'

Pétain was not yet prepared for a show-down. He retired to his room and, on 27 September, drew up yet another amendment to Constitutional Act No. 4. This provided that, if he were permanently prevented from exercising his functions, seven people named in the Act were to 'recall the National Assembly and hand it back the powers which it confided to me on 10 July 1940'. Copies were handed in secret to Pétain's solicitor, to the Procurator-General of the Court of Appeal and to the Vice-President of the Council of State. They had the double purpose of proving the Marshal's devotion to republican procedure and re-emphasising the fact that the Assembly had legally bestowed its powers on him.

On 25 October Pétain returned to the attack, asking Laval to dismiss four Ministers and accusing him of being unable to keep order, of having lost the trust of the Germans, and of being unacceptable to the United States. This last point was of great importance to the Marshal, for there were still signs that Roosevelt might enter into negotiations with him. Laval took the precaution of placing Vichy's only remaining military force, the First Regiment of France, under his own control.

On the afternoon of 12 November Laval received a call from the broadcasting services asking for formal instructions to broadcast a recording of a speech by the Marshal that they had just received. Laval, who had heard nothing about this, hurried up to the Marshal's room and asked for an explanation. The Marshal showed him a new amendment to Constitutional Act No. 4, also described as the 'sixth' amendment, since the one he had drawn up in September was still a secret. It provided for the reversion of the Marshal's powers direct to the Assembly.

Laval read it and grinned. He reminded the Marshal of all the speeches he had made attacking parliamentary government. 'This isn't an act of constitution,' he said. 'It's an act of contrition.' But he smelt a large rat somewhere and asked Pétain why he had not been consulted before the act was drawn up. And what about the Germans: had they been consulted? What sort of conclusions were they going to jump to?

Pétain sent a draft of his speech to Krug von Nidda. The significant passage was merely a reaffirmation of the Marshal's

legitimacy: 'The stability of a country is governed by its legitimacy. Without legitimacy there can only be adventures, factional rivalries, anarchy and fratricidal strife. Today I embody French legitimacy. I intend to conserve it as a sacred trust and return it on my death to the National Assembly from which I received it if the new constitution has not been ratified.'

The speech was innocuous enough, though vital to Pétain's anti-de Gaulle campaign. But von Nidda said that he must communicate it to Schleier in Paris and Schleier telephoned it on to Berlin. In the meantime von Nidda politely requested that the speech should not be broadcast that evening and put a Gestapo guard on the broadcasting station to see that his request was complied with.

In Berlin Ribbentrop was suspicious and consulted Hitler. A revival of the National Assembly was as unwelcome to the Nazis as it was foreign to Pétain's character. The new amendment deprived Laval of the succession, yet he had not complained: was he also in the plot, whatever it was? Since Badoglio had got rid of Mussolini in Italy, Hitler had a sensitive eye for palace revolutions, and Marshals. Ribbentrop summoned Oberg and Knochen from Paris to get the S.S. point of view and, after having kept him in disgrace for a year, dredged up Abetz, who was still the best authority on the way Pétain and Laval might be thinking.

In Vichy Krug von Nidda returned to the Hôtel du Parc to inform the Marshal that his speech definitely could not be broadcast. It had been announced at intervals during the day but at the last moment the expectant listeners heard a programme of light music. Pétain was a worried man, for it was ten days since de Gaulle had formed his own mock-Parliament in Algiers.

Pétain read to von Nidda a statement that he had prepared during the afternoon, protesting against the German ban. 'I take note of it and bow before it, but I declare to you that until the moment when I am able to broadcast my message I consider myself in a position where it is impossible for me to exercise my functions.'

Next morning he was absent from the ceremony of hoisting the colours in the Old Park, which took place every Sunday. The Swiss radio had announced some days before – quite erroneously –

that he was suffering from heart trouble, and the rumour flew round that the Marshal was ill. Hearing this, he took his hat and stick and set out for Mass, but instead of going to the church of Saint-Louis, on the other side of the park, where he usually sat in state in the choir, he turned up at Saint-Blaise, considerably farther away, entering by a side door and taking a seat among the rest of the worshippers. He strolled back through the New Park, beside the Allier, very content at having made it clear that he was on strike.

Laval, who had spent Sunday at home at Chateldon, learned on Monday morning that Pétain had cancelled all his official lunches and receptions. He had also announced that he would not summon any Councils of Ministers. 'They can have a Cabinet meeting if they like, but since I shan't countersign the decisions for the *Journal Officiel*, Monsieur Laval, who is supposed to have full powers, won't be able to do anything.'

Laval was indignant that the old man should now start posing as the champion of republicanism. He was furious at being put in a position where, if Pétain made his broadcast, it would look as if Laval had tried to stop him because of his loss of the 'dauphinate', and, if the broadcast were not made, it would look as if Laval had called in the Germans to prevent it. By now there was no secret about what was in the speech, for Pétain had it communicated unofficially to the foreign Press and distributed in pamphlets, and all France could hear it in foreign broadcasts.

Pétain continued to refuse to carry out any official duties, at the same time making it clear that he was in the best of health. To a group of admirers from Normandy he said: 'Now which leg is it I can't use? The left? The right?' He shot each out in turn, performing a little antic gymnastic display. In Paris rumours circulated that the Marshal had surrendered to the Germans as their prisoner, that Laval had been arrested, that Doriot had been asked to form a Government. On the Bourse the franc fell to one thousand to the dollar.

Towards the end of November Laval tried to make peace with the Marshal. He went up to the third floor and began: 'Monsieur le Maréchal, I should like to keep you informed of what is happening in the Cabinet . . .'

'How is Madame Laval?'

'Very well, thank you.'

'And you? No more trouble from your bullet wound?'

'Thank you, no. At the Cabinet meeting . . .'

'And how are things at Chateldon? A good yield from the vines? Are you satisfied? And the sawmill?'

Laval withdrew, defeated. He was depressed and pessimistic, and the gossips in Vichy said that he had grown more superstitious than ever; that he was constantly having his fortune told and sometimes dealing the cards himself. If the signs were unfavourable, he would refuse to take a decision all day.

On 4 December the Germans took a hand. Abetz, reinstated as Ambassador, arrived in Vichy with his escort of heavily-armed S.S. bully-boys and presented Pétain with a letter from Ribbentrop: two thousand words of complaint, abuse and threats. Ribbentrop rejected Pétain's protest at the banning of his speech and communicated the following observation from the Führer:

The German Government indignantly rejected Pétain's intention to revive the National Assembly, 'that same Assembly which, in September 1939, declared war on Germany without the slightest justification'.

'The present state of affairs had become intolerable and the German Government found itself obliged to insist that all proposed modifications of the law should be submitted in advance to the German Government; that Monsieur Laval should be charged with the immediate re-casting of the Cabinet in a form that would be acceptable to the German Government; that those individuals in the higher posts of the administration who were hindering the work of recovery should be immediately dismissed; that if the French Government were not capable of preserving order in the areas behind the German armies, the German Government reserved the right to take other decisions on the subject of the internal situation in France.

The note, couched throughout in the most arrogant style, ended with a brutal slap in the face for Pétain: 'If you consider yourself unable to carry out the German requests indicated above, or if our rejection of your proposed law aimed against German interests makes you decide to consider yourself

prevented from exercising your functions in the future as in the past, I have to inform you, in the name of the Führer, that he leaves you entirely at liberty to draw from it whatever conclusions that you wish.'

Pétain had overplayed his hand. In trying to protect his job from de Gaulle he had laid himself open to having it taken from him by the Germans. He climbed down at once. In private he said he still intended to get rid of Laval and that he would not answer Ribbentrop's note: as Head of State he would deal only with Hitler. But the next day he gave Abetz a statement in which he agreed to resume his duties: 'on condition that no publicity is given to this decision'.

On 11 December he wrote to Hitler, affirming his good intentions and accepting the appointment of a 'personal representative' of the Führer, Cecil von Renthe-Finck, whose duty was to keep an eye on him. On 18 December he wrote again: 'I state precisely that modifications to the law will henceforward be submitted to the occupying authorities before publication.' No Head of State could sink much lower and still claim to be independent.

Laval had gone off to Paris, frothing with rage at the Marshal and his associates: 'A fine result! They wanted to get rid of me and now they're going to be forced to accept Déat. We still had a chance of negotiating. Now we're under the boot and I have to go and patch up other people's stupidities!'

Abetz, Laval knew, would not want a *gauleiter*, for that would mean losing his job as Ambassador. Neither, probably, would he want complete control of the Government by the pro-Nazis, who were more likely to deal with the S.S. than with the Embassy. Everything depended on the extent to which Abetz was prepared to modify his instructions in order to preserve his position.

On his first visit to Vichy Abetz, in accordance with his orders from Berlin, had demanded Cabinet posts for Déat, Doriot, Darnand and Henriot. Of these, Doriot was the most dangerous and the most deeply committed to the Germans: a former Communist, a politician embittered by his failures under the republic, the head of his own political party, the *P.P.F.*, and the

founder of his own private army, the *L.V.F.*, with which he had fought on the Russian front.

Déat, his rival, had formed the *Rassemblement National Populaire* as an alternative 'single party' to Doriot's. A man of considerable intellect and education, he had begun on the left, had held minor Ministerial posts, and during the war had distinguished himself by the unrelenting attacks on Vichy and its lukewarm collaboration which he published in *L'Œuvre*.

Darnand was a thug. A man of extreme courage, he had been decorated in both wars for bravery under fire. He had risen to high rank in the *Légion Française des Combattants*, had taken over the *S.O.L.* and then moved on to command its successor, the notorious Militia, which had been formed in January 1943. A born sergeant-major, he was brutal in the execution of his orders and incapable of taking any intelligent initiative outside of them. As a member of the Government he would be a threat not to its policy but to its reputation.

Henriot, too, was a man of less weight than Doriot or Déat, a voice on the radio rather than a politician. The warm and plausible simplicity of his broadcasts at times convinced even the least collaborationist Frenchman of the crimes of the Anglo-Saxons who had destroyed the French fleet and stolen part of its empire, and whose mounting aerial bombardments were bringing death and ruin to many French cities.

For three weeks, spending most of his time in Paris, Laval negotiated with Abetz and Abetz with Berlin. He persuaded Abetz to drop Doriot's nomination and in return accepted the other three, even Déat whom he perhaps thought it best to take into the Cabinet in a minor post now for fear of having him imposed on him with more extensive powers later.

But the Marshal dug his heels in again. He would accept the others, but he would have nothing to do with Déat, who had attacked him so often in the past. Déat had, for that matter, frequently attacked Laval, and Laval had removed *L'Œuvre* from the list of newspapers receiving subsidies from the secret funds.

'I don't mind being blackguarded,' he said. 'But at least I'll have it done free.'

Pétain put his objections on paper, accusing Laval of the

responsibility for introducing the pro-Nazis into the Government. Laval wrote sharply back that 'in our last interview I voluntarily refrained from reminding you of the circumstances which have confronted you as well as myself with these German demands. I cannot let your argument remain unanswered. If I remained silent, I should be accepting the criticisms which your note contains in my respect. I refuse to endorse by my silence the false judgment which History would not fail to record if your notes were published unaccompanied by the reminder of certain facts and details. I will make it my duty to send you shortly a note on this subject.'

He began to dictate it, was distracted and, as so often when confronted with the distasteful task of putting things on paper, he never completed the note. Unlike the Marshal, he was never a great believer in personal insurance.

Abetz refrained from insisting on Déat's appointment, but refused to give way on the question of the discharge and replacement of members of the administration. The Marshal's secretariat suffered heavily and some of Laval's supporters came under fire. He managed to save Rochat; but Bousquet, who had given him stout and level-headed support as head of the police, was supplanted by Darnand, and shortly afterwards arrested by the Gestapo.

On 29 December Pétain signed the appointments of Darnand and Henriot. The same day he received the Führer's special envoy, Cecil von Renthe-Finck, who was promptly nicknamed Rin-tin-tin and Hudson Lowe.

[7]

WITH THE ENTRY of Darnand and Henriot into the Cabinet in January 1944, the collapse of Laval's policy was in sight. Whether or not the anticipated Allied landing took place that year, whether or not it was successful, France could no longer avoid being torn apart by internal dissension. As the Allied strength increased, the Resistance found more members. The

maquis, swollen by young men fleeing from the compulsory labour service and a small proportion of criminals fleeing from justice, raided villages for food if help was not given voluntarily. Supporters of the Vichy Government were assassinated or received miniature coffins through the post, warning them of the fate in store for them. Prefects received notification that they had been sentenced to death by the courts-martial of the Resistance. Magistrates, 'brave but not foolhardy', as Laval commented, began to find excuses not to preside at trials or to avoid passing sentences of death.

In Paris and in the other large towns, men of the Resistance and the *maquis* made armed raids on food offices to get ration-cards and on labour exchanges to destroy records. Assassinations of German troops brought dreadful reprisals from the S.S. Towards the end of 1943 Allied aircraft had begun to drop arms and supplies to the *maquis* groups, who mounted small-scale military operations against factories working to supply the Germans.

There was now an average of sixty attempted political murders every day. With Bousquet's help, Laval had kept the police out of pro-Nazi hands and had warded off the offers of help from the Gestapo; but the French police had neither the numbers nor, often, the inclination to deal with what had become a limited and scattered, but permanent, uprising. In desperation, Laval agreed to the setting-up of courts-martial to deal with murderers caught red-handed.

The Marshal had for a long time been adjuring him to take 'severe measures against the disturbers of public order. I am not averse to the creation of courts-martial to try men who have killed. It is better, in fact, to have a certain number of spectacular executions rather than confusion and disorder.' Yet Laval should have foreseen what would happen with a man like Darnand in command of the police and the Militia. Within a few months he had regretted his decision, but by then the Militia had earned itself a name almost as hideous as that of the S.S. and it was impossible to check its ravages.

The guards were doubled outside the Hôtel du Parc but, since the latest purge of his hot-headed advisers, an atmosphere of comparative calm had returned to the Marshal's suite on the third

floor. He put the finishing touches to his constitution and made fewer appearances at the Council of Ministers, much to Laval's relief. 'Let me do all the dirty work,' he said. 'You remain above it.' He smiled and added: 'Besides, when you're not there I can lead the Ministers at the double – and I can smoke.' The Ministers gave up meeting at the Pavillon Sévigné in favour of the Hôtel du Parc, where they all sat round a large dining-table in the room next to Laval's office.

Sauckel came back to Paris in mid-January, complaining that, of the 670,000 workers nominally sent to Germany, only 400,000 were actually there, and asking for a further million. Abetz supported Laval's opposition and told Sauckel: 'If ever the *maquis* puts up monuments in France, you will have the biggest. And the inscription will be: "To our principal recruiting agent, Gauleiter Sauckel, from the grateful *maquis*".'

Sauckel stormed out and telephoned a protest to Ribbentrop, who ordered Abetz to give Sauckel his support. But Abetz continued to warn and advise Laval and no more Frenchmen left for Germany.

The Germans demanded that Déat should be appointed Minister of Labour. Laval, confident that he could neutralise Déat if he were in the Cabinet, and fearing that the next German demand would be for Déat to be appointed Vice-President of the Council, told the Marshal that he was ready to agree. But Pétain had been incensed anew by one of Déat's headlines: 'German generals are recognisable by their *revers* [the lapels of their jackets]; so are French generals, but not the same kind' (the word also means a military reverse). The Marshal refused to accept him.

On 11 March von Renthe-Finck called on Pétain and told him: 'I have something unpleasant to say to you today. The German Government attaches great importance to Monsieur Déat's entry into the Cabinet.' Pétain replied: 'He is a man who is universally detested in France. If he enters the Government, I shall retire.'

On his way out von Renthe-Finck said to Commander Tracou, Pétain's new secretary: 'You ought to know that the threat of resignation won't worry anybody; we shan't try to keep the

Marshal.' Pétain talked a little more about retiring but decided against it: 'If I retire, the Germans won't leave me long at liberty; they'll take me to Germany.' He contented himself with leaving Laval to sign the announcement of Déat's appointment in the *Journal Officiel*.

To those around him, Laval at this time seemed to be more and more a man in a dream, invincibly stubborn in the belief that his policy would turn out all right in the end. 'Whatever happens, London, Berlin and Paris will eventually have to accept this policy of a united Europe that I have foreseen.'

To Martin du Gard he went over his old arguments, as if talking aloud to convince himself. 'There are never any victories. These affairs always finish badly. What I want is that we should come out of all this as well as possible. . . . It's a question that interests the English too – and, as always, they'll catch on ten years too late. . . .

'I believe it's still possible to come to an understanding and that it would be best for everybody. You wait and see: they *will* come to an understanding, the Germans and the Anglo-Saxons – they're cousins. And I don't want it to be on our backs. I want it to be thanks to us; I want it to be us who make the peace – and for us not to think about anything else. . . .'

He puffed at his cigarette and passed one to his visitor, who was so surprised at this unusual gesture that he forgot to light it. Laval offered the glowing end of his own cigarette and continued:

'We shall all be poor, we are all poor, but on the threshold of being rich together we musn't miss the opportunity. We've played at being heroes; now we must play at being men.'

He rambled on, disjointedly and often almost incoherently. Out of nowhere he said: 'They've got a secret weapon. That could be a nasty business.' He left it and continued:

'We're very sick, eh? But I still have confidence. This people cannot die. France cannot die. I repeat that every day and I believe it. But there are times. . . . When I get back to Chateldon in the evenings, I put on my sabots and I go off to look at my chickens and my pigs – it's a consolation after human beings. . . .' He got up from his chair and held his hand

out to his visitor. 'I believe they will do me justice one day. . . .'

With France in turmoil and monstrous carnage raging between the nations, he continued to see the problems of the world in the simple terms of life at Chateldon. Early each morning he left the château ('every comfort: hot and cold running water', he used to boast) escorted by his police guard, one of whom would often be carrying a wooden box containing the Presidential lunch. Early in the evening he would return to dinner cooked by his wife and sometimes eaten in the kitchen. The only regular domestic staff was a girl who came in daily and left at lunchtime. Occasionally the prize pigs would provide him with an enormous ham that stood on the sideboard and from which he would cut himself thick slices, despite his diet, and wash them down with a bottle of good wine, one of his few luxuries.

The villagers remained affectionate and outspoken. When he chided them for listening to the British broadcasts, they told him there were fewer lies in them than in the French ones. During the Russian advances, one of them warned him: 'Joseph's going to give Adolf a hiding - then you'll look pretty silly.'

He was still ready to discuss farming with anybody, at any time. One morning he noticed an unfamiliar face as he passed through the waiting-room and asked his secretary, André Guénier, whose it was. Guénier told him that she was some old woman from Carcassonne who made nougat: she wanted to talk to the President about bees. Laval had her sent in immediately and for an hour the other visitors were kept waiting while he discussed the wartime problems of making nougat when sugar, honey and almonds were all in short supply. When the old lady from Carcassonne left, Laval dictated an urgent memo to the Minister of Agriculture, instructing him to make immediate inquiries into the possibility of intensive apiculture to relieve the sugar shortage.

His wife seldom left Chateldon, occupying herself with household duties and - as she had done throughout their married life - going through the newspapers and marking the items that she thought Laval should read. Sometimes, though very rarely, she would be persuaded into accepting an invitation to a diplomatic

lunch in Vichy, as on the occasion when the Marshal entertained Cecil von Renthe-Finck and his wife.

As usual, the greatest politeness and insincerity was observed on all sides, the Germans telling the French of their great successes on every front, the French telling the Germans that they believed them. Laval, fortified by good food and good wine, took the occasion to return for the thousandth time to his constant obsession: why would not the Germans understand before it was too late that they should make peace in the West? He would arrange it. France had considerable influence in America and could use it to save Europe.

Renthe-Finck replied gravely: 'We know, Monsieur le Président, that the landing may take place at any time after 15 April. We are entirely unconcerned. The proof is that Marshal von Rundstedt has left to take the waters in the south of Germany. The Anglo-Saxons will meet with a great set-back, and after that set-back we can negotiate, but it would be pointless to do so before.'

There was a pause in the conversation and the irrepressible Mme Laval was heard to remark: 'What on earth is he talking about? They're done for!'

On 24 April Laval and his Ministers called on the Marshal to congratulate him on his eighty-eighth birthday. The following morning he learned, with surprise and suspicion, that Pétain was planning to leave for Paris that afternoon, to attend a Mass at Notre-Dame for the five hundred victims of a heavy Allied bombing raid on the city. He spent the night in the prefecture at Melun, where he went into the courtyard and said to the children who were clambering up the railings: 'Who's in the cage? Who's the prisoner? You or me?' When the children shouted, 'Us! Us!', Pétain answered: 'We all are — you as well as me.'

Within a few days it began to look as if he might indeed be made a prisoner. Since February Hitler had been insisting that the Government should move from Vichy to Paris, where communications would be easier in the event of an invasion. The Marshal disliked the idea of living in Paris but finally agreed to leave on 7 May and take up residence at the Château de Voisins, near Rambouillet, where he was surrounded by a nominal guard of Frenchmen and a real one of Germans.

From there he made a trip to Rouen, on the same day that the French Cardinals addressed a public appeal to their fellow-Cardinals in Britain and America, asking them to intercede with their Governments that more care should be taken in distinguishing between military objectives and the 'humble abodes inhabited by women and children which adjoin them'. All the doors and windows had been blown out of the prefecture, piles of rubble prevented access to the battered cathedral, and Pétain attended Mass at the church of Saint-Ouen, next door to the Hôtel de Ville, the candles flickering, the chandeliers swaying and the altar cloth flapping in the wind that came through the empty windows.

Back at Voisins he received, at Admiral Platon's request, his first visit from Déat, who was wooing the Marshal as a preliminary to mounting a full-scale attack on Laval. A few days later the Lavals came to lunch, Pétain putting himself out to be pleasant to Mme Laval, but without success. She never overcame her distrust of him and she was worried about the news from Algiers, where de Gaulle had set up summary courts and had shot Pucheu, the former Minister of the Interior. Laval seemed as confident as ever: 'They can insult me, they can throw stones at me - I don't mind. I am convinced that I shall be proved right against all the French put together.'

Towards the end of May the Germans changed their minds again and, announcing that they believed the invasion would come in June and that Voisins would be too near the battlefield, they persuaded the Marshal to move back to the Château of Le Lonzat, about eleven miles from Vichy. On the way he visited Nancy and Dijon and, gratified with his reception, he set out a few days later to visit Lyon. There, on 6 June, he heard of the Allied landings and received a telephone call from Laval, asking him to return to Vichy immediately.

The final agony of France had begun. Earlier in the year Laval had sent a circular to all prefects and mayors warning them that the armistice terms must be strictly obeyed, that they must remain at their posts and resist any attempt, from either side, to force the civilian population to take any part in the war. He now went to the microphone and repeated: 'France is not in the war.'

... You must refuse to aggravate a foreign war with the horror of civil war. ... Think of France and of her alone.'

But France could not escape the war. During May she had suffered nearly 1,300 air-raids. With the advance of the Allied armies, whole towns were blotted out. The concentrated bombing of stations and junctions reduced rail traffic to a quarter; not a single bridge remained standing across the Loire or the Seine from Paris to the sea. Paris was threatened with starvation.

Civil war had come to France, too. The Militia under Darnand now openly co-operated with the German forces. The *maquis* rose prematurely and, short of equipment and over-eager, was horribly mauled in pitched battles with the Wehrmacht.

War and civil war and mass German atrocities: in Tulle, where the *maquis* had attacked the German garrison and killed forty of them, the S.S. Division *Das Reich* hanged ninety-nine civilians from lamp-posts and balconies along the main street. The following day, at Oradour-sur-Glane, a battalion of the S.S. Division *Der Führer*, to avenge the capture of one of their officers, herded 500 women and children into the church and the men into barns. They set fire to the buildings and machine-gunned any who tried to escape.

At the end of June Philippe Henriot was shot in his flat at the Ministry of Information. The Militia demanded a national funeral and that the body should lie in state at the Hôtel de Ville. Laval, knowing that this would produce a bloody clash between Resistance and Militia – and knowing that the Militia knew this too – refused, and was supported by the head of the Municipal Council. The extremists came out into the open. Déat, backed by the S.S. and joined by Darnand and the Militia, kept up an uninterrupted attack on Laval.

Je Suis Partout, the most violent of the pro-Nazi weeklies, organised a demonstration at the Vélodrome d'Hiver to shouts of 'Laval to the gallows!' and printed cartoons of him as a horse-coper and greasy chestnut-seller that were indistinguishable from those in the British and American papers. Déat denounced Laval's insistence on French neutrality, proclaiming that 'he opposes all action, disperses and dilutes everything that he touches'.

That same day, in Vichy, Laval learned of the murder of Georges Mandel. Abetz had told him some days previously that Hitler wished to send Mandel, Blum and Reynaud back to France to serve as hostages against the men of Vichy who were being executed in Algiers. Laval had asked the Spanish Ambassador to warn Algiers of this, but did not know that Mandel had already arrived in France.

Mandel was held in Paris for three days by the Gestapo and then handed over to the Militia, who claimed that they were going to intern him at Les Brosses, near Vichy. On the way, while passing through the forest of Fontainebleau, they staged a mock attack and killed Mandel. Darmand telephoned the news to Laval, who went white with rage. He ordered the Minister of Justice to bring the Militiamen to trial and rang de Brinon in Paris: 'I have just learned of the assassination of Georges Mandel. I cannot use any other word. You are to go immediately to the German Embassy and tell Abetz quite plainly that he must tell his Government to keep the hostages that it has said it will send us. . . . One corpse is enough!'

[8]

ON 11 JULY Admiral Platon slipped into the Marshal's study while his secretary, Tracou, was absent and presented him with a 'joint declaration on the political situation' signed by four Ministers, Déat, Bichelonne, Brinon and Bonnard, and by about thirty other pro-Nazis, including Doriot, Luchaire and Platon himself. It was a direct attack on Laval. It criticised the Government's actions, 'purely defensive and undermined by doubt and hesitancy. . . . We are heading for chaos. . . . No Government, whatever it may be, can now hold France except by giving proof of its strength. . . .'

The signatories demanded immediate action on five points: the Government must make its position clear; it must return to Paris; it must be enlarged by the admission of 'unquestionable elements'. The Council of Ministers must be strengthened in its

powers and called upon to deliberate and decide on general policy. Severe sanctions, including the death penalty, must be used against all whose actions encouraged civil war or compromised France's position in Europe.

In short, this was to be an amalgam of the Committee of Public Safety and the Committee of General Security, the same organ of terror that had ruled France 150 years before. And as Robespierre? Platon, presumably, since he assured Pétain that out of deference to his dislike of Déat the others agreed that Déat should be merely Minister of State, serving under Platon who would be President of the Council. The other Ministers, Platon added, would no longer support Laval's neutral policy and were determined to resign and force the dissolution of the Cabinet.

Given their point of view, their criticism of Laval was justified. They saw their only hope in ruthless repression of the Resistance and wholehearted support of Germany. Even had Laval not been blinded by his stubborn belief in the reasonableness of men and the inevitability of a negotiated peace, he was temperamentally incapable of carrying out such a policy. He had courage and determination; he never hesitated to put through measures in which he believed, no matter what unpopularity they brought him; he was supremely disdainful of other people's opinions. But when argument advanced from reason to force he lacked the ruthlessness to face it. He had always hated war; he was incapable of waging war. His greatest self-deception was that a moderate man could guide a beaten country when all the world was at war.

Platon had no sooner left the Marshal than Tracou went into the study and was shown the document. He went down to warn Laval, who began inquiries and discovered that Abetz had been given a copy of the declaration and had left for Berlin with it. Laval ordered an emergency meeting of the Council of Ministers for the following day.

The Council of Ministers assembled at 4 p.m. on 12 July around the dining-table in the small pale-blue room next to Laval's office. Storm clouds hung over Vichy and the air in the room, already heavy and hot, became stuffy with smoke as they nervously puffed at their cigarettes. Laval entered and took his seat at the head of the table. Facing him was Cathala, and, on one

side, Grasset. These were the only two of whom he was sure. Déat had remained in Paris.

His dark eyes were glittering under the heavy lids. He went straight into the attack, producing the declaration that Platon had left with Pétain. At his first reference to it, Bichelonne hastily interrupted to say that he had signed it 'in a moment of tiredness'; de Brinon added that he had given his approval 'with some reserve'.

'I don't want to make this a question of personalities,' Laval said. 'I have glanced through this paper; I will now read it over again to you.' They stared intently at their blotters while he read it out word by word. At the end, he said: 'I take it that the signatories of this document are not in agreement with my declaration of 6 June. They demand that the Government should make certain gestures, take certain actions. I ask: what gestures, what actions? They also demand that the Government should be enlarged. I ask: with what new elements?'

He was glaring at de Brinon, who answered: 'I know nothing about it.' Laval continued: 'The Ministers who signed this document are at liberty to speak and I ask them to be good enough to explain themselves.'

De Brinon, still caught in the penetrating stare, said: 'Monsieur le Président, I have absolutely no desire to oppose you; it would be out of place on my part, and I repeat that there is no question of it. I did not draw up the document; I had no part in drawing it up; I do not know who was the author. But I must say that the text reflects an uneasiness that is fairly widespread in Paris and which has been highlighted by two recent affairs: first the funeral of Henriot, which gave rise to painful arguments with the Municipal Council. . . . Then there is the business of M. Mandel's death. I think it would have been better if the position taken by the Head of the Government had been discussed beforehand with the Council of Ministers . . .'

Laval, still speaking calmly, replied: 'A few days ago I was warned by the Embassy that Messieurs Blum, Reynaud and Mandel were going to be returned to the French Government to serve as hostages and to be shot if Colonel Magnien, who had been condemned to death at Algiers, was himself shot. I forcibly

declared to Ambassador Abetz that I refused to accept this arrangement. I said that such an action was not compatible with the laws of war; that it was taking a dangerous step on a path that could let loose civil war in France. I also added that, some day or other, the war will end and it will be necessary to talk with the Anglo-Saxons and, even from the German point of view, this would make a very odd preface to the conversations. With M. Abetz's agreement, I sent a note to the Spanish Embassy, begging them to make known to the Committee of Algiers the situation that had arisen.'

De Brinon interrupted: 'I must tell you, Monsieur le Président, that M. Abetz is not in agreement with you on this point. He says that you accepted the handing over and simply said: "It's not a present that I want".'

Laval swung round in his chair and thumped his fist on the table. He was shouting and there was froth at the corners of his mouth: 'I will not allow such a thing to be said! There is nothing more contrary to my character. I have no blood on my hands, and I will never have any!' He recounted the details of Mandel's murder and continued: 'I had no responsibility for this; I will not shield these actions; I reject such methods. . . . It was the same story with Jean Zay a few days ago. Two of them. That's enough. That's too many. Now I put it to the vote: let those who are not in agreement signify the fact.' They kept their heads down, still staring at the blotters. 'Then I record that the Council unanimously refuses any further handing over of hostages and any reprisals of this nature. . . .'

'When I read through this paper, I wonder why this sort of thing should be brought before the Council of Ministers. There's nothing in it but worthless lucubrations. I note that in this document no attention is paid to important affairs, essential ones such as the food supply, which is the real key to public order in Paris.

'But I do see one thing dazzlingly clear in this document. It is that I must go; I am to be replaced. At another time, perhaps I would have gone, but I am not convinced by reading this paper. The Government is to be enlarged. By whom? By Monsieur Platon. I'll show you what Monsieur Platon's style is.

‘Monsieur Platon forgets that a watch is kept on correspondence. A few days ago he wrote to his brother, and this is what I read in his letter: “At a moment when France is invaded by the Anglo-Saxons and Normandy is ravaged, I find it painful that a Head of the Government should declare that we are not in the war. This man deserves not to be shot but to be hanged. He will be.”

‘Monsieur Platon is an excellent man. He wrote himself a fine page of history at Dunkirk, but he would do better not to get himself involved in politics . . .

‘And now I come to the problem in general. I didn’t take up my political position today . . . During the other war, in 1917, I made a speech that was considered scandalous, asking for the Stockholm meeting. I went to Berlin with Aristide Briand in 1931. In 1939 I did everything I could to prevent war . . . I said, in June 1942, “I wish for the victory of Germany because without that Bolshevism will establish itself everywhere”. They usually suppress the second part of the sentence. I remain convinced that the United States and Great Britain will be incapable of preventing Communism from establishing itself in Europe. I’ve got a fairly long political past and I’m not accepting lessons from the people who signed this paper. I think only of France. I was born in France and I intend to die here; I will never leave my country. . . .

‘At the time of the landings, on 6 June, I made a speech and I am reproached for having said: “France is not in the war”. . . . They want France to enter the war on the side of Germany. M. Déat says he is not neutral – then let him join up, it’s easy enough. M. Déat also wants the *L.V.F.* to go and fight in Normandy; I have opposed it. . . . Against me I have only a few madmen who are in any case in no hurry to go and fight on their own account. . . . Are there any Ministers who think that France can have any policy other than my own?’

Abel Bonnard, the Minister of Education, made one more attempt to defend the proposals. ‘One can have no doubt about it, considering the state of France, Monsieur le Président But if one looks to the future, we must make use of the few who are organised in controlling the many who are not.’

Laval bristled again. ‘And what does that mean? This few: are

these the political movements paid by the German Government? They're not French movements. And these "Committees for Social Peace" which are nothing but groups of informers: are they going to revive France? . . .'

'To conclude, I will put this question to you: Are you in agreement with the policy expressed in my message of 6 June and particularly the phrase "We are not in the war"?' There was silence all round the table. 'Very well, I consider that we are in agreement.'

They got up and went sheepishly downstairs, through the hotel lobby and out into the Park. For Laval, it had been a notable victory. Perhaps it was his last. Certainly it was the last Council of Ministers that Vichy was to see.

[9]

THE GERMANS SUSPECTED that Pétain was trying to negotiate with de Gaulle and that Laval hoped to get into touch with Roosevelt. They planned to take the Vichy Government with them if they were forced to retire eastward. Despite Renthe-Finck's denials, the plan had reached Pétain's ears and he had lodged a note with the Papal Nuncio, saying that he would oppose it with every means possible.

Von Renthe-Finck called on Laval on 18 July to protest that the Marshal's allegations were untrue and the implication that the Germans would withdraw was damaging. He also complained that Laval should have warned him of the Marshal's intentions.

Laval was in no mood for politeness. The storm that had been hanging over Vichy for more than a week had broken. Hail was pounding down outside and the evening before he had cut his crop of rye at Chateldon. He also knew that, a day or two before, Pétain had mentioned that Laval had a high opinion of Tracou and von Renthe-Finck had replied: 'That's no recommendation to us.'

He glared at von Renthe-Finck and snapped: 'If you want me

to spy on the Marshal for you, I can tell you – it's not my line of business. And did you hesitate to intrigue behind my back with Platon and Déat?’

The break with the Germans was almost complete. On 21 July they heard of the abortive attempt on Hitler's life. Pétain refused to send a telegram of congratulations but Laval told him: ‘Mine was reasonably warm. He sent me one in 1941 when I was wounded, and offered to send the surgeon, Sauerbruch, too.’ He added: ‘The only pity is that he wasn't killed. What a lot of things could have been arranged!’

Vichy was becoming more and more isolated. The roads were blocked; the railway tracks had been blown up; only the telephone intermittently remained. On the last Sunday in July, Laval went out to Le Lonzat to have lunch with the Marshal and stayed talking with him through the afternoon. They discussed de Gaulle's probable strategy: to get some of his own troops into Paris before the Americans and thus impose his own Government; to refuse any negotiations with Pétain. It was more than ever essential that Pétain should go to Paris and at least hand over authority in legal form.

‘Otherwise,’ said Laval, ‘it will be civil war and revolution. The Republic will founder with it. I have too much respect for legality and affection for our institutions to let that happen. I want to hand over cleanly, without disorder. I will fight for that. I'm not a grocer to put a “closed” sign in the window. I will not let power go by default. There are many more risks for me than for you, Marshal, but whatever happens I will not leave, or, if I do leave, it will be as a prisoner. I know you still cherish the hope of an understanding with de Gaulle, but you are deceiving yourself; you will do nothing there.’

Unknown to Laval, Pétain had indeed given Admiral Auphan a note addressed to the Anglo-American forces and to de Gaulle, appointing Auphan as his plenipotentiary to agree on measures to prevent civil war – ‘provided that the principle of legitimacy that I embody be safeguarded’. He was, as Laval had said, fooling himself: de Gaulle did not intend to receive his crown at anybody else's hands.

Laval's own plan was to bring Herriot from the lunatic asylum

at Maréville, near Nancy, where he had taken refuge with his wife and his cook, and get him to summon the National Assembly, to which Pétain could hand back his powers, thus blocking both de Gaulle and the Communists who dominated the resistance. Since April Laval had been in touch with André Enfière, a very busy go-between who was trying to get Herriot released, was in contact with Washington through Allen Dulles's intelligence service in Switzerland, and was working for Georges Bidault, president of the National Resistance Committee and therefore pledged to help de Gaulle. On 6 August Enfière arrived at Chateldon and told Laval that Roosevelt would be prepared to support a Government headed by Herriot.

On 7 August the Prefects of the Seine and of the Police and the Presidents of the Municipal and Departmental Councils asked Laval and Pétain to come to Paris at once. Guénier took the message to Chateldon. The Marshal received a similar summons and also a private letter from General Brécard, Chancellor of the Legion of Honour.

'There is not a minute to lose,' Brécard wrote. 'If you are in Paris, the Americans will approach you. If not, it will be M. Laval who receives them and, since they do not conceal their intention to have nothing to do with him, they will replace him at once, together with the presidents of the two Paris councils. You will then be relegated to Vichy or elsewhere and your role will be finished.'

The Marshal approached the Germans for their permission to go to Paris and for two assurances: that he would not be kidnapped en route and that he could take his personal guard with him. Laval set off that night, accompanied by his wife and Josée.

It was a sleepless journey, his mind full of schemes and the obstacles that he would have to surmount. Through Abetz he must get German permission for Herriot's release and the summoning of the National Assembly; the parliamentarians must be convinced that this was not a trick, and that their lives would not be in danger from the Communists or de Gaulle; Pétain must be brought to Paris or Versailles to lend his authority and popularity.

Laval arrived at the Hôtel Matignon early in the morning of 9 August and set feverishly to work. He saw Abetz and persuaded him to forward his requests about Herriot and the National Assembly to Ribbentrop, and also to plead that Paris should be declared an open city. Seeking the support of some organised body, he called a meeting of the mayors of Paris and the department, harangued them, cajoled them, and triumphed once more. They signed an address assuring him that 'at the moment when the very existence of France is at stake, they affirm their entire confidence in his actions, persuaded that he will find in his love for his stricken country the safe paths that will lead the country towards resurrection.'

Others were not convinced. Parliamentarians who came to see him argued that the Assembly would not trust him and would not respond to his appeal. He assured them that this was no manoeuvre to hang on to power. There were two things that he wanted: to give an account of his stewardship, and to avoid upheaval in the nation by handing over authority legally and publicly. Time was now perilously short; the threat of insurrection and civil war hung heavily over the capital.

On 11 August Abetz brought him the news that Ribbentrop had agreed to liberate Herriot and to permit the National Assembly to meet in Paris. Laval, accompanied by Enfière and escorted by four German cars, left at 2 a.m. in the morning and arrived at Maréville at 10 a.m. Herriot, perplexed and suspicious, went back with him to the prefecture at Nancy where they had lunch and dinner before setting out at nine that evening to get to Paris under cover of darkness. Once they had to take shelter in a copse and Laval snatched some sleep; once they were fired on, presumably by the *maquis*, but were not hit. Shortly after dawn they arrived in Paris.

They went straight to the prefecture of the Seine, in the left wing of the Hôtel de Ville, and at first had difficulty in obtaining admission, since the Prefect thought that so early a visit could only be from the Gestapo. Herriot had asked that his official residence, as President of the Chamber, in the Palais-Bourbon, should be given him, but Abetz had not completed the work of clearing out the German airmen who had been billeted there.

Instead, Herriot was put in a ground-floor room of the prefecture, with four Germans to guard him, though he managed to have his tailor come in and measure him for a new suit.

Laval sent more messengers to Vichy, imploring the Marshal to come to Paris. Pétain sent word back that the Germans still refused to give him assurances against kidnapping and the escort of a suitable guard.

Herriot insisted that the strict letter of the constitution must be observed and the Assembly must be presided over by Jeanneney, the President of the Senate, who was somewhere in the Grenoble district. That night Laval sent part of his own police guard down to the Hôtel de Ville: Enfière had warned him that the Gaullists intended to kidnap Herriot and thus prevent the calling of the Assembly.

There was only one piece of encouraging news for Laval that day. Hitler had given orders that all the bridges of Paris were to be blown up and the city defended building by building; but the German military authorities, meeting at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, decided to ignore these instructions and order the evacuation of the city.

On 15 August the Americans and a Free French force under de Lattre de Tassigny landed on the Mediterranean coast; in Paris the railwaymen and police decided to go on strike. Déat called on Abetz and tried to convince him that Laval's plan would fail and that a new Government should be formed with Pétain still as Head of State and Déat as President of the Council. Abetz played for time, and Déat went to warn Oberg that Laval was plotting to desert the Germans. Oberg immediately telephoned the information to Himmler.

At ten o'clock the following evening, Laval went up to the dining-room in the Hôtel Matignon for a delayed dinner with his wife and daughter. At eleven the telephone rang and Josée answered it. It was a call for Laval from the Hôtel de Ville.

He listened, then put down the receiver and turned to his wife. He was pale with fury. 'The Gestapo are at the Hôtel de Ville,' he said. 'They've just arrested Herriot. Abetz gave me his word that he was free. I'm going down there.' He emptied his pockets, handing his wallet, personal papers and keys to his wife, then

went down to the courtyard and insisted on being driven off alone in the small car that was the only one available.

At the Hôtel de Ville he found *Hauptsturmführer* Nosek, the head of the Gestapo political branch in Paris, who told him that he had been ordered to take Herriot away that night. Laval, still beside himself with rage, poured a torrent of abuse on Nosek's head. Herriot, impressed despite himself, turned to the Prefect and whispered: 'Does he always talk to them like that?' Nosek eventually agreed to hold his hand. His police guarded the corridor while Laval telephoned to Abetz, who knew nothing of the affair but promised to make inquiries and come as soon as possible.

It was two o'clock in the morning before Abetz arrived, and then only to tell Laval that there was nothing he could do. Déat's warning to Oberg had brought a quick response: Himmler had personally ordered Herriot's arrest. Laval refused to accept it. He dictated a protest which he asked Abetz to send direct to Hitler, saying that if Herriot were arrested he would constitute himself a prisoner also.

The unfortunate Abetz, certain that whatever he did would be wrong, suggested that Herriot should remain at the Hôtel de Ville for the rest of the night and should then become Abetz's guest at the Embassy until Hitler's decision was known. Laval visited him there in the morning and invited him to lunch at the Hôtel Matignon; Abetz agreed that Herriot should go, provided that he himself was invited so that he might continue to keep an eye on him.

Tracou, whom the Marshal had been forced to dismiss, was in Paris and saw Laval when he returned from the Embassy. Everything that he had built up in his political and private life was falling in pieces around him – news had come that morning that the *maquis* had occupied the château at Chateldon and he had refused the Vichy Militia's offer to go and recapture it – but Tracou was astonished at his coolness, his apparent strength and complete absence of nervousness.

'The deeper you're in the mire, the better face you need to put on it,' Laval said. 'But the Marshal's up to a fine game. . . . When I told him he ought to be here, he might at least have listened to me. But no! He never gets beyond a lot of stupidities. . . . Well,

here we are at the end of a four-year experiment. It hasn't been brilliant. They broke the back of my policy on 13 December and after that we just dragged ourselves miserably along.

'I've never said anything against de Gaulle; he has his usefulness. What he said pleased and flattered the French. I didn't believe in the inevitable victory of Hitler any more than he did. I didn't know; I wasn't a prophet. But I was holding the handle of the frying-pan, not a microphone. It's not quite the same thing.

'The Resistance is all very well; it's very noble. I've always felt for them and I admire them. But it risked great losses for very little result. And we have need of all our men; we lack them terribly.

'You see, I've thought of only one thing since 1940: to keep war as far away from us as possible. Let the Germans go as far as Vladivostok if they want – they won't come back. . . . I still refuse to believe that the Americans will insist on unconditional surrender. That's propaganda, not politics. Are they going to play the Bolsheviks' game right to the end? People are mad . . .

'If France avoids spilling her blood she will always get back her place again. She will be the first to revive in Europe if she is well governed. We are not ruined; we've preserved our gold and our equipment. The four years of occupation have cost less than three months of war. . . .' He shrugged his shoulders. 'Ah well, perhaps in the end they'll admit I was useful.'

It was a strange lunch party in the dining-room of the Hôtel Matignon, the windows flung open to let in the warm bright air from the garden: the three married couples at the table, the Laval, the Herriots, the de Chambruns – and the lonely German, Abetz. There was one moment of argument and passion, when Abetz said that he saw no hope of Herriot being allowed to return to Maréville, as he had asked, and that he would have to accompany the Government eastward. Mme Laval protested vigorously that this would be unfair to Herriot, in involving him with the Government, and unfair to Laval, in appearing to make him a party to the trick. Abetz promised to do what he could and the conversation returned to gossip about the past.

The lunch party did not break up until after four. Laval went down into the courtyard to say good-bye to Herriot, who was

taken to the Hôtel de Ville under S.S. guard to prepare his belongings for the journey. René de Chambrun followed later, on the pretext of taking him some cigars, and proposed that he and the Prefect should arrange for Herriot to escape through the sewers and be hidden with an American friend of de Chambrun. But Herriot refused and, with a large gesture, said: 'Let destiny take its course.'

In the early evening, Laval held his last Council of Ministers. Abetz had sent his Counsellor, Hoffman, with the official notification that the German Government invited the French Government to withdraw to Belfort. Two Ministers, Bridoux and Bléhaut, were in Vichy; three, Darnand, de Brinon and Déat, had already left. The remainder agreed unanimously to reject the German request.

At ten o'clock Hoffman returned with the German ultimatum. 'In case of a refusal,' Abetz wrote, 'the application of means of constraint will be inevitable. You and the members of your Government will see in this decision on the part of the German Government not only the expression of their concern to preserve tranquillity and order in the rear of the German army but also their legitimate concern to assure the personal security of the French Government.' Laval replied that he had no other course than to obey. 'But you will understand that, in these circumstances, I cease to exercise my functions.'

He sent for the Prefect of Police, the Prefect of the Seine and the Presidents of the two Paris councils, appointing them to receive the Allied military authorities as representatives of the Government. Early that afternoon he had signed an order for the release of the political prisoners in the prisons of La Santé and Les Tourelles. Bichelonne had persuaded the Germans not to blow up the power stations.

In the Hôtel Matignon the electricity had been cut off. While plain-clothes Gestapo men prowled in the courtyard, Laval packed his papers by the light of two candles and an oil-lamp. Abetz arrived with S.S. men in uniform. He had assembled the other Ministers under escort in the Boulevard Saint-Germain but could not find Cathala, Grasset and Chasseigne. 'Where is M. Cathala?' he asked. 'I've no idea,' said Laval, who had given him

permission to disappear. 'The stinker promised me some cigarettes and now I'll have to go without them.'

In his secretary's room some twenty people had gathered to say good-bye. He took his hat and cane and then went round shaking hands with each of them. 'There is no longer any French Government,' he said. 'I am a prisoner like the others.'

By the light of an electric torch, he led his wife down the steps towards the car. Josée and René de Chambrun had asked to be allowed to go with them, but Laval had refused. He and his wife embraced Josée and got into the car. A moment later he got out again, saying '*Toi, encore une fois*', and held Josée to him. Then he returned to the car, took his place on the rear seat with his wife beside him and two Germans in front, and the car drove off.

In Vichy Pétain's companions had drawn up a scheme for his personal guard and the gendarmerie to provide a screen while he made a dash to the Loire below Blois where he would be able to make contact with the Americans. He showed great interest at first, then decided against it and returned to his preoccupation with establishing proof that he was being taken away by the Germans against his will.

On 17 August von Renthe-Finck handed him the official German request that he should move from Vichy where it was feared he would be in danger. Von Renthe-Finck hinted that the new seat of Government would be at Nancy and that Laval had already gone there. (Abetz had told a similar lie to Laval, saying that the Marshal had gone to Belfort.)

The telephone line was cut, and Pétain sent one of his aides to Paris. He returned on the evening of the 19th when the Marshal was packing his bags, having been told that the Germans would bomb Vichy if he did not leave. The Marshal's aide brought photographic copies of the letters that Laval had given to the Prefects, stating that he was being taken away against his will.

Von Renthe-Finck arrived five minutes later and was confronted with the evidence of his lying, but he insisted that Pétain must leave at ten that night. Pétain protested that this was impossible and it was at last agreed that he should go at seven the following morning.

The sad little comedy was played out to the end. At 5 a.m. on

Sunday morning, 20 August, the Marshal's guard took up their positions in the hall of the Hôtel du Parc, rifles in their hands and open cases of grenades beside them. They blocked the revolving doors at the entrance with two chairs and closed the gates leading to the staircase. Soon after half-past six the Germans put a cordon round the hotel and blocked the adjoining roads with trucks. At a quarter to seven a dozen Gestapo men walked up to the revolving doors and asked for them to be opened. The guard inside refused. The Germans kicked in the glass, removed the chairs, and marched in. The Marshal's guard, obedient to orders, did nothing.

The Germans broke down the gates and went up to the third floor. In the corridor outside the Marshal's room, members of his staff had gathered with the Swiss Ambassador, Stucki. The officer in charge of the German party asked for the door to be opened. Colonel Barré, commander of the guard, replied that the Marshal was sleeping and nobody had the right to disturb him.

The German officer went off to telephone General Neubronn, the Wehrmacht representative, who arrived within five minutes. He too asked for the door to be opened. When this was again refused, he tried the handle and found that it was locked. He gave a signal to one of the Germans, who charged it and burst it open. Within, another door led to the Marshal's bedroom. This one resisted shoulder charges and was forced off its hinges with a crowbar. Inside, the Marshal, clad in shirt and trousers, was tying his shoe-laces. 'You will at least let me get dressed?' he asked.

He had Stucki and the Papal Nuncio brought into the room and read to them the letter that he had written to Hitler, ending with 'a solemn protest against this act of force which makes it impossible for me to exercise my prerogatives as Head of the French State'. He walked through the outer room and entered the lift, accompanied by his wife.

As the lift arrived at the ground floor, the guard presented arms. Pétain shook hands with the officer in command and walked to the hotel entrance, where a thin crowd had gathered in the pouring rain. With his wife and Ménétrel he got into his car and was driven off. Wet and bewildered, the onlookers began to sing the *Marseillaise*.

LAVAL'S CONVOY, MAKING its way with difficulty past the retiring German columns, arrived at Nancy at 11 a.m. on 18 August and stayed there for lunch, a meal at which Laval vented his wrath on Hoffman: 'You've treated France like a conquered country; you haven't had the slightest understanding of the situation. You have no psychological sense and no foresight. You have neither diplomacy nor diplomats. You are going to be beaten; you are going to be bolshevised; and serve you right.' At nine o'clock that evening they arrived at Belfort, worn out by travel during the heat of the day but with Mme Laval still in sufficiently good spirits to answer, when the Prefect asked what was happening: 'What's happening? Why, Monsieur le Préfet, it's the German collapse. In a few days you'll see them passing through Belfort, columns of troops of every sort that we've overtaken since we were kidnapped in Paris.'

Laval was now in more danger from the Militia than from the Germans or the Resistance. Several hundreds of Darnand's men poured into Belfort and took over the barracks close to the prefecture to house themselves and their women. On the Wednesday after Laval's arrival, a group of Militiamen clattered into the ground floor of the prefecture. The Prefect, Lalanne, ordered them out, but they refused to go. He went upstairs to warn Laval.

Laval sent for their leader and a young man of about twenty-five slouched into the room, his hands defiantly thrust into his trouser-pockets. Laval stared at him. 'Are there armed Militiamen at the doors of the prefecture?'

The young man stared back: 'Yes.'

'Who put them there?'

'Me.'

'I don't want them.'

'It is to ensure your safety.'

'I don't need them.'

'I think otherwise.'

It looked as if, instead of being the prisoner of the Germans, he was about to become the prisoner of the Militia, from whom he would receive short shrift. 'It displeases me,' Laval growled. 'Do you understand?' He could see the Militiamen hesitating. 'You will remove them immediately,' Laval said.

The young man backed towards the door, his hands still in his pockets. Laval followed him with his eyes until he had left the room. A couple of days later, two Militiamen in civilian clothes were discovered lurking in the garden where Laval took his after-lunch stroll. They claimed they were there to steal petrol, but could offer no explanation for the pistols found in their pockets.

Laval persuaded the local authorities to release 400 political prisoners; but when Hemmen asked him to authorise the issue of 8,000 million new banknotes from the Banque de France at Nancy to cover the occupation costs owing since 21 August, Laval told him that he was no longer exercising his powers. 'You took plenty in Paris,' he said. 'That's enough.'

On 25 August he was invited to meet Hitler, and refused. Déat, Doriot, Darnand and de Brinon accepted and had a long discussion with Ribbentrop and the Führer, who wanted Doriot to form a new Government. De Brinon, pretending to support the idea but hinting heavily that Pétain would not accept Doriot, got himself appointed head of a 'Governmental Commission for French Interests in Germany' under 'the high authority of the Marshal'. But Pétain would have nothing to do with it. France at this moment had no self-government at all. The Marshal and Laval held the titles but refused to exercise their powers; de Gaulle, who had flown to France on 20 August and entered Paris with Leclerc's troops on 25 August, had not yet been granted provisional recognition by the Allies.

By 6 September the Allied armies advancing from the west and south were pressing on from Verdun and Lyon, and Laval and Pétain were warned that they would be taken to Germany the following day. Laval, his voice rough with emotion, read to Abetz the letter of protest that he had written to Hitler: 'Last April I ordered the prefects and officials to remain at their posts in the event of an invasion. They obeyed me. Some of them have paid for their obedience to this order with their lives. I seem to have

acted like the captain of a doomed ship who orders his crew to stay on board while he leaves.'

Protests were of no avail. He was unmistakably a prisoner now; the following morning, at Freiburg-im-Breisgau, he discovered that he had left behind at Belfort his overcoat with the cyanide phial in it. He telephoned anxiously to the Prefect and the coat reached him before they set out again, across the Black Forest to Sigmaringen, where they were all quartered in the vast, ornate castle of the Hohenzollerns, poised on a cliff-top above a loop of the Danube.

Pétain occupied the top floor, with the Laval on the floor below, luxuriously accommodated in a large bedroom, two sitting-rooms, two studies and an enormous dining-room, all decorated in the heaviest fanciful Teutonic style. The others were lodged in two wings of the castle.

Social relations were sparse and constrained. Laval refused to have any contact with the members of the 'Governmental Commission'. Doriot had found himself headquarters elsewhere and was negotiating with Hitler to set up a 'Committee of Liberation' and make himself a sort of de Gaulle in reverse.

The atmosphere of the place weighed heavily on Laval. 'I'm crushed by these marble halls,' he told a visitor. 'I'm a peasant. I wish they would give me somewhere simple to live.' Mme Laval, equally dissatisfied with her surroundings but more energetic in her reactions, was prevented only by its weight from picking up a bust of the Emperor William I and throwing it out of the window into the Danube below.

At dinner one day they found that there were extra places laid at their table and learned that von Renthe-Finck proposed to join them. Mme Laval announced that in that case she would have her dinner on a tray in the bedroom, and von Renthe-Finck went to dine elsewhere.

Laval spent his mornings reading and learning German; sometimes, as he made his way downstairs to the library, he would pass Déat and exchange a frigid nod. Once or twice he met Corinne Luchaire, the pro-Nazi journalist's film-star daughter – the Luchaire circus shared the lower wing with Déat and played Lexicon with him every night – and she noticed how haggard he

had become. He had heard a false rumour that Josée had been arrested by the Gaullists and was raging with anger and despair:

'The Germans are swine. They forced me to leave. They haven't missed making a single mistake. Here am I, a prisoner, powerless. I could still have arranged everything over there – now there will be excesses, blood will flow, it will be irreparable. And why have they arrested Josée . . . Josée! Why harm Josée? I'm ready to take full responsibility. I shall explain myself. I'll make my case known at the trial: for there is bound to be a trial at which I shall be able to speak . . .'

He was not entirely convinced that he *would* be allowed to speak. A court at Marseilles had tried him in his absence and sentenced him to death 'for intelligence with the enemy'. Hoffman met him one afternoon and mentioned the trial. 'Well,' said Laval curtly, 'it's better to show that you were intelligent with the enemy than that you were stupid with them.' But later he commented: 'If a few maniacs found me in France and strung me up out of hand, they'd now be able to say they had the law on their side.'

The Germans watched him closely. There were always two Gestapo men at his heels when he went for afternoon walks with his wife. Unlike the others, he was not allowed the use of a car and only once received permission to go as far as Constance. He had lost all faith in the German ability to resist and shrugged off their stories of secret weapons in which he had once believed.

One evening, while he and his wife were listening to the French radio, they heard that the château at Chateldon had been taken over to house refugees. The radio reporter, touring the château, announced: 'And here is the golden dagger presented to Laval by Abetz . . .'

Laval looked up from his book and said: 'Numskull! If it's a dagger, it can only be the one that was given me by the Sultan of Morocco during my first Presidency of the Council, when he came to Paris for the Colonial Exhibition.' He smiled faintly and added: 'If he's got his facts right, he'll be able to tell them in a minute that the splendid carpet in my study was given me by Stalin.'

Nostalgia for France and worry over Josée's fate steadily

increased their depression. One day Mme Laval halted during the course of their walk and began to scream, over and over again, the names of the dogs that they had left at Chateldon. Laval renewed his plea to be sent to some simple country place and only narrowly missed being despatched by the malicious Ribbentrop to an estate in Silesia that the Russians were about to overrun. In February 1945 they were finally allowed to settle a few miles away at Wilflingen, where Laval interested himself in the farm work and dabbled about in some watercress beds that had been left to grow choked and useless.

By March they could hear gunfire in Alsace, added to the constant waves of bombers that flew overhead; by April, French troops were already in Württemberg. The ultra-collaborationists with their printing presses and radio stations and ragged private armies, began to fall back towards the Tyrol, where the Germans intended to make their last stand. Laval and Pétain refused to go with them.

Pétain learned in April that his trial in Paris was set for later that month. He wrote to Hitler, asking that he should be allowed to return and face the charges. There was no reply. Both he and Laval were ordered to go to the Tyrol, but all central authority had now broken down in Germany and they persuaded their captors to let them go to the Swiss frontier. Pétain crossed into Switzerland on 24 April, his eighty-ninth birthday; two days later he arrived at the French frontier at Vallorbe and, for the first time in fifty years, was met by a guard of French soldiers who did not present arms and a French general who refused to shake his hand.

Laval arrived at Feldkirch, on the Austro-Swiss frontier, and asked for permission to enter Switzerland and stay there for three weeks to restore his energy and prepare his defence before passing into France. The Swiss, perhaps fearing Allied reaction if they made concessions to the most detested of Frenchmen, perhaps uncertain whether they would get rid of their visitor once they had admitted him, refused to grant anything more than a twenty-four-hour transit visa. On 29 April Laval was told that a German plane was at his disposal.

He decided to make for Spain and on 2 May, the day after Hitler's suicide in the Berlin bunker, he landed with his wife at

Barcelona airfield. If he had expected a warm welcome from Franco, he was disappointed. The colonel in charge of the airfield said that Spain had decided not to accept high-ranking political refugees and suggested that Laval should take another plane on to Ireland, which had not signed the convention on war-criminals. (Laval's name was never, in fact, on the list of war-criminals. 'Me?' he said. 'I'm not a war criminal - I'm a peace criminal.')

Ireland was too far from France and too far from Josée; Laval refused to consider it. He asked to be allowed to telephone Lequerica, formerly Spanish Ambassador at Vichy and now Minister of Foreign Affairs; but Lequerica could not be contacted. The Spaniards decided to intern him in the fortress of Montjuich, overlooking Barcelona and the sea; there he and his wife were accommodated in a new building destined to be the officers' mess, and had their meals sent in from a hotel in the town.

A week after their arrival Laval decided to return to France, and arrangements were made for him to be flown in at the end of May; but he changed his mind at the last moment and asked to be allowed to remain in Spain until he had finished preparing his defence. He was torn between the desire to justify his actions and the realisation that, if he waited until the post-Liberation excesses had died down, he would stand a better chance of being listened to. On 5 June he wrote to General de Chambrun, René's father, asking if he should return immediately or not. The letter, sent through the Spanish Foreign Office, did not reach the Chambruns until 29 June; the General's reply, warning him that it was still dangerous to return, never reached Laval at all.

The Free French Minister in Madrid, supported by the British and American Ambassadors, had been making representations to the Spanish Government ever since Laval's arrival. The Spaniards finally agreed that he should be handed over not to the French but to the Allies and presented Laval with an 'urgent invitation' to leave. At 3 p.m. on 30 July Laval and his wife boarded the same plane that they had arrived in and, with the same two German pilots, flew to Innsbruck. There they were handed over to the American army, which handed them on to the French.

On 1 August 1945 Laval landed under escort at Le Bourget, almost exactly a year since he had left France. He and his wife

were led off to the cars which would take them to their separate prison cells. As she was driven out of the gates of the airport, she turned and waved to him through the rear window. His own car followed hers along the road to Fresnes, where he was locked into cell 170 on the first floor of the third division.

The Germans had made their unconditional surrender on 8 May. The Japanese had tried to open peace negotiations, but for them it was to be unconditional surrender too. On 5 and 9 August, Hiroshima and Nagasaki were atomised. What Churchill had described as 'the unnecessary war' had been ended with the unnecessary bomb.

THE HIGH COURT OF JUSTICE

[1]

PÉTAİN'S TRIAL HAD been proceeding for a week when Laval returned to France. Under the constitution of 1875 Ministers and high officials of the State accused of crimes were brought for trial before the Senate; but de Gaulle had been governing for a year without elections and there was no Senate for them to be brought before. Instead, de Gaulle had in November 1944 set up a High Court composed of three magistrates and twenty-four jurymen, of whom half were chosen from among the eighty parliamentarians who had voted against Pétain in July 1940 and half from members of the Resistance. Pétain protested, as Laval did later, that the Court was biased and incompetent, but his objections were overruled.

The sittings were held in the first chamber of the Court of Appeal, on the first floor of the Palais de Justice, a comparatively small room whose accommodation had been enlarged by the erection of tiers of wooden benches. Here, in the afternoon of 3 August, Laval made his first public appearance.

The court was crowded, for it had been known since the previous day that Laval was to be called. The door opened and Laval entered, escorted by warders carrying sub-machine-guns. He had been called from his cell at Fresnes at six that morning and taken to the depot of the Prefecture of Police where he had been lodged in a cell. It was evident that he thought he was to be

done away with, out of hand. His hair was almost white, his blue suit hung loosely from his shrunken body, there was a large gap between his white shirt and tie and his scraggy neck, his eyes darted nervously from side to side.

Half-blinded by the barrage of photographers' flashlights, he saw a figure in an advocate's gown standing in his path and, to reassure himself, held out his hand. The lawyer took it and found it 'long, soft and fluid as water'. He was to see it often, writing or gesticulating, during the next ten weeks: he was Maître Albert Naud, shortly to be appointed one of Laval's three defending counsel.

Facing Laval as he was led to the witness stand was the Marshal, silent and immobile as a wax figure. Since making his protest against the competence of the Court, he had refused to question witnesses and, when himself questioned, had pretended to be too deaf to hear what was said.

Laval knew nothing of the evidence already given by the stream of ex-Ministers and soldiers who had preceded him in the witness-box, each eager to justify himself and, under the skilful guidance of Pétain's lawyers, ready to throw the blame on Laval. Even had he known it, his attitude in the witness-box would not have been different, for he was too shrewd not to realise that his only hope of salvation lay in forcing the Court to consider his motives, not his acts, and that Pétain's trial was in a sense his own.

The President of the Court made the mistake of asking Laval, as his first question, when he had first made contact with Pétain in politics. It was at the time of Doumergue's National Government eleven years before, and Laval embarked on a rambling account of almost every event in his life since then. The President tried to interrupt him. Laval apologised but maintained that everything he was saying was pertinent to the question. As he spoke, his confidence returned. He reviewed the vote of July 1940, the meeting at Montoire, the 13th December, his return to the Government in 1942, the speech of 22 June in which he had wished for German victory.

Before the Court rose, and immediately after Laval had been taken back to the cells, Pétain broke his silence to deny that he had ever approved the speech of 22 June 1942. The following day

Laval returned to the witness-box and gave evidence on the *relève*, the German occupation of the southern zone, the scuttling of the fleet at Toulon, the murder of Mandel, the crimes of the Militia and the deportation of himself and the Marshal to Germany. He left the court confident that he had impressed it. As he passed Pétain he bowed and said: '*Au revoir, Monsieur le Maréchal.*' The Marshal stared straight ahead.

Back in his cell at Fresnes, Laval got to work on drawing up his defence and appealing for the release of his wife. He appeared before a *juge d'instruction* and made a written statement, declaring that she had never taken an active part in politics, had hated the Germans and had tried to dissuade him from entering the Vichy Government. On 22 August he received the first visit from the three lawyers who had been appointed to defend him: Naud, whose hand he had shaken at the Marshal's trial; Jacques Baraduc, a fellow Auvergnat, with the dark hair of the Auvergne and sympathetic brown eyes; and Yves-Frédéric Jaffré, an enthusiastic young barrister from Brittany, who was to do most of his clerical work.

The lawyers told him that they had seen Bouchardon, the president of the *commission d'instruction*, and Béteille, the judge who would be handling the inquiry, which in France fulfils many of the purposes of a preliminary hearing in a magistrate's court. Béteille had drawn up a comprehensive plan of questioning and had assured them that the inquiry would be 'long-winded', necessitating at least twenty-five sessions, perhaps forty. Since Laval had no money and the lawyers were working without fees, Béteille promised them duplicates of all statements that were taken, and of any other essential documents in the Laval dossier.

The following day the questioning began, in an upper room at the Palais-Bourbon, looking out on to the apartment where the Chambruns lived. Laval, very much at his ease, asked permission to smoke and began answering questions on his financial status before the war. But then the questions came faster, and passed rapidly from one charge to the next: Alsace-Lorraine, the Jews, the Freemasons, the workers, the Militia, the scuttling of the fleet. Laval, unwilling to be hurried, said: 'I will answer you in

writing.' Before he left, he was allowed to go into an adjoining room and talk with Josée.

The following morning Baraduc found him calm but suspicious. 'Shall I tell you what the scenario is?' Laval said. 'There'll be no *instruction* and no trial. I shall be condemned – and got rid of before the elections.' It was a shrewd forecast. De Gaulle had fallen out with the Resistance and feared that they would defeat him at the elections. Despite his assurances that France was on the way to economic recovery – and the rather transparent trick of temporarily suspending bread rationing just before the elections were due – he was being criticised for his dictatorial methods and the rumour had gone round that he would be lenient with the Vichy 'criminals' because he intended to set up a similar Government himself. The execution of Laval would at least serve to answer the last of those points.

But as August passed into September it seemed as if Laval's suspicions had been unfounded. The inquiry continued; he offered his long, rambling explanations. He had won the sympathy of his warders at Fresnes. He had been allowed a little electric hot-plate on which he cooked himself fried eggs and regretted that he had not the materials for ox-tail stew, a dish that he prided himself he could cook to perfection.

In the cell close to his that had been set aside as an interview room, he gossiped with his lawyers about his past life, returning frequently to his childhood and his taste for rough practical jokes. He showed them the scar on his head, where he had been hit with a sabot during a fight. He told how he had shocked the village schoolmistress by lighting a fire of straw under the mule that refused to draw his carrier-cart to the Gare de Ris.

'She threw up her hands and said: "That boy will end up either as a Minister or on the scaffold." That's the sort of prediction that often comes true – in this case, both predictions.'

None of his lawyers had ever met him before. He saw most of Jaffré, who sat with him, talked, listened and took down notes that he wanted to dictate. Baraduc, who quickly became convinced of Laval's innocence, kept contact with the Chambruns and at first shared their conviction that Laval would be acquitted or at most receive a sentence of temporary exile. Naud, who had been a

member of the Resistance, believed Laval to be guilty and urged him to plead that he had made grave errors but had acted under constraint. Laval would not listen to him; he was convinced that he was innocent and could prove it. 'He acted,' said Naud, 'as if his career, not his life, was at stake.'

On the afternoon of Thursday, 6 September, the mood of the inquiries changed abruptly. Two members of the *commission d'instruction* joined Bêteille in the questioning and made it clear that the proceedings were to be hastened. Laval protested and was soon involved in a quarrel with one of them. 'There's no need of any *instruction* for you,' he was told. There were, in fact, two more sessions and then, on 16 September, his lawyers learned from the newspapers that the *instruction* had ended. On 19 September they were informed that a supplementary *instruction* would begin the following day, and immediately protested to the President of the Commission that the first one had not been even a quarter carried out.

They received no reply. Although the first *instruction* had not been completed and the second one had not begun, the newspapers were already announcing that the trial would begin on 4 October. Laval went four more times to the Palais-Bourbon, where he was questioned on irrelevancies but had the consolation of meeting Josée, who brought him fruit and cigarettes and once his favourite samoyed, Louvette. On 21 September Baraduc asked to see the dossier of which Bêteille had told him he would have copies made. He was told that Bêteille had locked the documents in his safe and had gone on holiday, taking the keys with him.

On 25 September, Mme Laval, who had refused the services of a lawyer, was released from the women's quarter of Fresnes and went to stay with the Chambruns. On 30 September she wrote to the Minister of Justice:

'On 17 August 1944 President Laval was deported to Germany and I followed him into exile. On arrival with him in Paris on 1 August, I was imprisoned at Fresnes and kept in isolation until last Tuesday.

'Happy at being at liberty, so that I could embrace my children once more, I now have only one wish: to rejoin my

husband, whose health I have watched over for many years.

'I should be deeply grateful if you would authorise me to join him in his cell as soon as possible.' She received no reply.

On Wednesday, 3 October, the prison van and its motor-cycle escort came to Fresnes once more to take Laval to the depot of the Prefecture of Police. He was given a cell in the women's section, its walls decorated with rhymes, drawings and obscenities; during the morning his lawyers came to ask his permission to withdraw from the case: they refused to accept the responsibility of a defence which they had not had time to prepare and for which the prosecution had made no documents available. They hoped, by their protest, to force an adjournment.

In the afternoon Laval was taken to the Court of Cassation to be present at the selection of the jury. His lawyers, though they refused to appear in court, remained with him to advise him and he had told them that he did not intend to challenge any of the jurors. As he waited to go into the court-room, a Jewish journalist whom he had protected during the occupation came up to shake his hand and whispered: '*Je souhaite la victoire de Laval.*' The jury having been chosen, the President of the High Court, Mongibeaux, announced that 'we shall, if necessary, sit morning, afternoon and evening. But we shall finish before the elections.'

His wife visited him the next morning, before he was taken to court. They sat in the interview room, watched by warders through the glass door. She had brought him some *brioche*s and a bottle of claret, which was against prison regulations, and he stooped down behind the table to drink the wine straight out of the bottle. A warder came towards him and Laval waved the bottle cheerfully and said 'Good health!' The warder walked away again. The armed guard began to form up outside the door, but Laval motioned to them to wait a moment while his wife straightened the cuffs of his white shirt. Then he sat at the table while she combed his hair; though nearly white, it was still thick and he tugged his head forward against the strokes of the comb.

He got up and walked out into the corridor; he straightened his back and, in his familiar blue striped suit and white tie, with his cane hooked over his arm, carrying his grey homburg hat and the brief-case engraved 'Pierre Laval, Président du Conseil', he

no longer looked like the hunted man who had entered the High Court to give evidence at Pétain's trial two months before.

The court-room was not completely filled: many people having believed that the trial would be postponed at the last moment. Seating himself in the armchair in the middle of the court, he put his brief-case and a badly-tied bundle of notes on the table in front of him, then mechanically straightened the knot of his white tie. He looked round the court-room and saw several journalists whom he recognised, nodding to them and saying: 'Hallo, old man . . . Keeping well?' Then he asked for water and the court usher brought him a carafe and a thick tumbler.

President Mongibeaux opened the proceedings by reading the letter which Laval's lawyers had sent him that morning, in which they explained their reasons for not appearing in court: that they had been given insufficient time to prepare their case, that the *instruction* had not been completed in accordance with the law, and that Mongibeaux had shown partiality by his remark that the trial would be finished before the elections whatever happened. They also complained that he had accused them of 'blackmail'.

As Mongibeaux began to deny the accusations, he found himself interrupted by Laval, calmly contradicting him on every point. Finally he ordered him to be silent and asked for the views of the prosecuting counsel, the Attorney General. Mornet, a sharp-tongued old man with a pointed pepper-and-salt beard, rose to his feet and denied that the documents had not been made available and protested against the accusation that justice was being subordinated to political preoccupations. In any case, he said, there was no need of an *instruction*, for the facts of the case were known to everybody, beginning in 1940 and continuing through a series of Governmental acts in which Laval had taken part even when they were not directly inspired by him. He recited them in his harsh, elderly voice and, as he came to 'the persecution of patriots . . . the courts-martial . . .' Laval could contain himself no longer.

He bounded almost to the foot of the judges' bench and shouted: 'But you were all under the orders of the Government at that time — you magistrates, and you, Mr Attorney General——' The statement was true, though not likely to endear him to the

Court. The three judges had all dispensed the Vichy laws and taken the oath of allegiance to the Marshal. The elderly Mornet had offered to come out of retirement to sit at the Riom trial, but had been refused and had contented himself with the vice-presidency of the de-naturalisation commission.

Mongibeaux tried to silence Laval, saying: 'I repeat once more——' Laval's voice strengthened to a roar that astonished the people in court. 'You can condemn me; you can do away with me; but you do not have the right to vilify me!'

From the bench where the parliamentary jurymen were sitting came a shout of 'Shut up, traitor!' Neither the President of the Court nor the Attorney General rebuked this interruption. Mongibeaux continued: 'I repeat that if you say anything that might constitute an insult to the magistrates, I shall carry straight on to the calling of witnesses.'

Laval was still beside himself with fury. 'I am a Frenchman,' he shouted. 'I love my country and it is only my country that I have served——' His voice was drowned in more interruptions from the jury and then, suddenly, the whole court was in uproar. From the seats near the door, where members of the Bar had come to listen to the case, there were protests and catcalls directed at the President of the Court and the Attorney General. Laval repeated: 'I love my country!' A jurymen shouted back: 'A little more modesty, scoundrel!' Laval again raised his voice above the tumult: 'You will recognise it when I have spoken – I will prove it in a moment.'

Mornet turned to the judge and said: 'I will not tolerate this improper attitude any longer.' Mongibeaux ordered the guards to lead the prisoner away. A sturdy *garde républicain* sat next to Laval throughout the trial, now and then bending forward and protesting gently but firmly: 'Now, now, Monsieur Laval, you mustn't speak to Monsieur le Président like that: it isn't nice.' He got to his feet to conduct Laval out of the court-room, but Laval extended his right hand to the judge, saying: 'I beg your pardon . . . I offer you my apologies.'

Mongibeaux accepted his apology. The jurymen were still rising from their seats, demanding that the court should be cleared. Mornet begged them to master their indignation and

repeated that the Laval case had needed no preliminary *instruction*. He asked Mongibeaux to order Laval's three counsel to re-assume his defence. 'If the defence bench remains empty, it will not be the responsibility of the magistrates.'

Mongibeaux invited Laval to speak. Laval ran through the long list of subjects on which he had not been interrogated: the vote of the National Assembly; Montoire and his relations with the Germans; his internal policy; the German requisitioning of food and workers. He again asked that the *instruction* should be resumed. To the jury he said: 'The passion that animates you has kindled my own. When you have heard me, we shall understand each other better. In accusing me, you think that you are defending France. When you hear me, you will realise that it is France that I have served. Then you will agree that the *instruction* should be re-opened and completed for the sake of true justice.'

He turned to the reporters in court and told them that his request that the proceedings should be recorded in the *Journal Officiel*, as had been done in the Marshal's case, had been refused. He asked them to publish full accounts of everything he said. 'Law and force constrain me to be present here as an accused man. But if my body is fettered my soul is free. I wish it to be known – and I will prove it – that I have worked and suffered for my country. Then justice can be done.'

Mongibeaux announced that he officially appointed Naud, Baraduc and Jaffré to defend the accused; but Laval had not finished. He pointed out that, not only had the *instruction* not extended over the twenty-five hearings that Bêteille had promised, but his lawyers had been unable to consult the dossier against him. 'I need advocates. There are things which I perhaps cannot say or which I may forget. There is all the work of preparation which I cannot undertake because the material conditions of my life at the moment do not permit it. Why deprive me of this right of defence?' He protested that the Court was irregularly constituted; that the trial was being rushed through before the elections because, if a Senate were constituted after the elections, then the trial would be taken out of the hands of this provisional Court and sent to the Senate.

'I am accused of the most abominable and grave crimes. . . . As

a simple citizen, as a private person, I have the right to defend myself. But, gentlemen, I have a higher duty which is imposed on me by the offices I held. I cannot have my affair judged as if it were a simple case of shoplifting . . . ' He asked for a week's delay, so that his lawyers might prepare his case after being shown the documents that were to be used in evidence against him.

Mornet rose to deny that the Court was incompetent, since it had been instituted by an order of November 1944, or that promises about the number of interrogations had any value, or that Laval's lawyers had been refused access to any documents that they were entitled to see. Laval again got to his feet and was involved in a heated argument with Mongibeaux.

'Will you allow me——'

'You will give your explanations at great length during the course of the trial.'

'The accused has the right to speak after the Attorney General. You know very well that is the law.'

'You have just spoken.'

'I have not spoken. I said nothing.'

'You have just spoken. I consider you have spoken enough. This incident has had all the explanation it needs. There is nothing more for you to say.'

'If I am not to be allowed to reply to the Attorney General——'

'Clerk, read the indictment.'

'It is lamentable that I may not reply . . . !'

'It may perhaps be lamentable, but I will take the responsibility.'

At this there was a new outburst from the lawyers at the back of the court. They muttered, shouted, rose to their feet and booed the President, then left the court. Mongibeaux saved his face, which was now as white as his beard against the scarlet of his robes, by announcing that he would suspend the sitting while he discussed with the President of the Bar the misconduct of its members.

The Court reassembled at 2.30. Mongibeaux warned Laval that if he showed lack of respect for the Court he would be removed and the trial would continue without him. He again ordered the clerk to read the indictment, and then proceeded with

the *interrogatoire*: a long outline of the prisoner's career. Laval, much calmer now, continued to interrupt him as before.

Mongibeaux said that he was making a correction to the indictment: Laval had been three times Prime Minister, not twice, and fourteen times a Minister, not thirteen. 'I'm glad of that,' commented Laval. 'Thirteen is a very unlucky number for me.'

Mongibeaux, who appeared intent on dragging in everything that might arouse resentment against Laval, referred to his economy decrees in 1935. 'From which France is still benefiting,' interrupted Laval, 'with the stocks of gold that remain to her today.'

'My outline of this part of your career has perhaps been a little long,' said Mongibeaux. 'And a little inexact,' added Laval in a stage whisper, 'but that makes it more colourful.' 'I recognise the rights of the accused,' Mongibeaux continued, 'if he uses them with dignity; I will not, for instance, allow him to disturb the hearing.' 'It's easy to see you're not in my position,' said Laval. 'There are moments when emotion is natural.'

Mongibeaux referred to Laval's early contacts with Germany in Briand's time and his later contacts with Hitler and Mussolini. 'I knew Stalin in exactly the same circumstances,' Laval said. 'You've forgotten him in your list. I knew him in the same way as I knew the other two.'

Mongibeaux passed on to the origins of Laval's fortune. Laval protested that this was precisely the subject that he wanted to have dealt with at length in an *instruction*. Mongibeaux: 'You will be able to give your explanations. In my opinion, the point is only of secondary interest.' Laval: 'For me it is of great importance. I have to defend myself and mud is being thrown at me: I want to wash it off in public.'

Mongibeaux tried another malicious side-swipe at Laval: 'So that we may not dwell any longer on a subject that is displeasing to you——' 'Oh no,' said Laval. 'It is agreeable; this is the first time that I have been able to explain myself publicly and triumphantly.'

'There was a very considerable increase in your fortune,' continued Mongibeaux. 'Experts assess it at fifty-eight to sixty

millions. There are rumours that these fifty-eight millions are only a fraction of it——’ ‘Well, I’ve now got a thousand francs in the gaoler’s safe at Fresnes,’ said Laval.

Laval’s interruptions were now becoming longer than Mongibeaux’s attempts to get on with the *interrogatoire*. The argument wandered over Laval’s pre-war policy, his opposition to the war, his attitude after the war had begun. Soon many of those present did not know whether they were in the Government or out, on the Somme or in the Maginot Line, in 1914, 1939 or 1945. ‘I wanted to prevent war,’ Laval said.

Mongibeaux foolishly invited him to explain that statement and they were immediately back in 1931 again. ‘I didn’t bother to ask Brüning whether he was a Catholic. . . . Do you think I tried to reach an agreement with Mussolini because he was a Fascist? In 1935 I saw Mussolini first, the Pope three days after, Stalin some weeks later, and Göring on my return from Moscow. Could you have more variety than that? If I had known the address of the devil I should have gone to find him to make peace . . .’

Mornet now interrupted and received the sort of treatment that Laval had been accustomed to mete out to his Cabinet at Vichy. ‘Mr Attorney General,’ said Laval, ‘you will understand when you know. Your excuse and that of the President of the Court (and it is this which prompts me not to withdraw my respect from you, as I hope you will give me yours at the end of this trial) is that you are ignorant of the facts: you do not know.’ He branched off on to the Jews, Freemasons, Communists. With interruptions from Mongibeaux and Mornet the discussion leapfrogged from the Riom trial to the morale of the army, from Pétain to Laval’s protest before the Commission of Foreign Affairs in March 1939, from Laval’s policy of encircling Germany to his attitude towards England.

Despite the deadly seriousness of the occasion, there was an element of comedy as white beard and pepper-and-salt beard bobbed and nodded to each other, trying to prevent Laval dragging them into a morass of words: a morass which Mornet had prepared for himself when he introduced so many insinuations into the indictment.

‘Pierre Laval may have been a hundred times right in his policy

before the war,' said Mornet, 'but that is not what is being tried.' 'Then why,' asked Laval, 'do you mention it in the indictment?' Mornet answered that the trial was concerned with the period beginning in September 1939. Laval turned to Mongibeaux: 'In the indictment you reproach me for my foreign policy . . . Now my opponent is beating a retreat on the foreign policy.'

Mornet: 'I am not beating a retreat . . . I have not based any charge on your foreign policy.'

Laval: 'Oh yes, you have!'

Mornet: 'I base it on your policy during the war.'

Laval: 'Thank you; I am obliged. But, in any case, I cannot explain my attitude during the war without explaining my attitude before the war. . . .' He was off again on his admiration for the English, or at any rate for their determination to defend their own interests – a determination that many Frenchmen ought to have. Then he was arguing about his entry into the Vichy Government and the armistice, pointing out that the armistice had been decided upon before Reynaud's Government arrived in Bordeaux.

'You did not enter the Pétain Government at the moment when it was formed,' Mongibeaux continued, 'because you were very exacting, and demanded the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—' 'Force of habit,' said Laval. Mongibeaux quoted from the secret session of the Assembly an intervention in which Laval predicted the defeat of England and referred to Mers-el-Kebir.

'And what did you think yourself about Mers-el-Kebir at that time?' asked Laval. 'A short time ago, you told me that your position was not mine,' snapped Mongibeaux. 'I return the compliment. I don't have to answer you; I'm not yet accused by you——' 'Oh, you never will be,' said Laval. 'Carry on.'

Mongibeaux tried, not very successfully, to sum up what had been said and asked if Laval wished to reply to the first part of the *interrogatoire*. Laval said that this was too like the way that the *instruction* had been conducted: there had been many subjects covered and he did not intend to make any reply that could be considered as final. He reserved his right to go back to the first article in the indictment and deal fully with it the following day: the charge that he had used his political position to improve his private fortune.

Mornet announced that this was not a charge in the indictment: it was merely a statement. Laval said that he didn't intend to leave it as a mere statement. He began to trace the libel back to the Front Populaire Government of 1936, but was presently heard to be talking about Bordeaux and the armistice. 'I haven't spoken about the armistice in your connection,' said Mornet. 'The President of the Court did,' Laval replied. 'He's added a new accusation to yours.'

He discussed the armistice and then the vote of the National Assembly. 'There were 569 votes in favour. Can I seduce 569 senators and deputies, Monsieur le Premier Président? I wish I had such a power of seduction: it would never have been more useful to me than at this moment . . .' The afternoon wore into evening and Mongibeaux announced a twenty-minute recess. As Laval was escorted out, he waved towards his chair and asked one of the journalists: 'Care to change places with me for a while?' But his flippancy covered considerable exhaustion and when the trial resumed he asked if he could be excused any further questioning that day.

Mongibeaux asked him whether he had not the strength to continue for half an hour. Laval protested that he needed to be in full command of his intelligence, and again asked that the *instruction* should be re-opened. He complained that he had no facilities for preparing his defence. He stretched out his arms: 'I have a cell no bigger than this——' 'Every patriot was acquainted with a cell like that under your Government,' shouted one of the jurymen. Laval protested that the Government was interfering with the conduct of the case, pressing it on because of the elections.

'France is free, and she deserves to be. Well, if she is free and if she is proud——' A jurymen again interrupted: 'It's no thanks to you.' Laval continued to insist that he was entitled to further *instruction* and a delay of the proceedings.

Mongibeaux asked: 'Will you let me speak?' 'Evidently,' said Laval. 'I've no means of preventing you.'

'I have already given you two warnings,' said Mongibeaux. 'Do you want me to expel you instead of giving you a third?'

Laval slammed his brief-case on to the table in front of him.

'Condemn me out of hand,' he shouted. 'It would be more straightforward.' Mongibeaux ordered him to be taken out of the court-room.

As Laval went out, a young man at the back of the court shouted: '*Vive Laval!*' A jurymen leaped to his feet and shouted: 'Arrest that man!' Another yelled: 'It's the fifth column!' And a third: 'He deserves a dozen bullets in his hide, like Laval!'

On this note of impartial justice the day's hearing concluded, after the President had announced that he would not continue with the *interrogatoire* and that the trial would proceed in the absence of the accused.

[2]

THE SECOND DAY of the hearing began with excitement but ended with boredom. Mongibeaux decided to have Laval appear in court, and he was accompanied by his three counsel, who had obeyed the summons from the President of the Bar. Naud and Baraduc repeated their protests that they had not been given sufficient time to prepare the case, which they had been led to believe would not be heard for several months, and had not been allowed to see relevant documents. Both of them became involved in violent altercations with Mongibeaux, Mornet and the jury; when the magistrates retired most of those in court believed that it was no longer possible to refuse an adjournment and a resumption of the *instruction*.

But when the magistrates returned, they announced that they had overruled the counsels' objections and the trial would continue. After a brief but angry argument with Mongibeaux, whom Laval rightly accused of quoting against him statements that he had never made, the afternoon settled down to an almost uninterrupted monologue by Laval. At six o'clock he pleaded that he was tired, and the Court rose.

When his counsel went to visit him in his dark and filthy cell in the depot, they found him contented and optimistic. The trial seemed to have settled into normality. He might successfully play for time until the elections and the return of the Senate. He might even convince this packed jury, though he recognised that the feat

would be difficult: he had to prove a negative – not what he had achieved but what he had prevented.

He was still in high spirits when he entered the court at one p.m. the next day. Mongibeaux, on the other hand, was brooding on the newspapers' reports that Laval had had the better of him during the first two days' hearings. Laval read a letter of protest that he had written to the Minister of Justice on 22 September, when he had heard that the *instruction* was to be suspended, and Mornet accused him of trying to 'delay the hour of justice'. 'Yes,' shouted Laval, 'until full light is thrown on it.'

After a further interjection, Mornet snapped: 'I did not interrupt you.' 'You don't interrupt me,' said Laval. 'You insult me.' Mongibeaux warned him to be careful of his words and Laval replied: 'You can't say I'm insolent just because I speak!'

Mornet continued with his argument that there was sufficient evidence to condemn Laval without having need of an *instruction*. If Laval had been captured immediately after the Liberation and taken before a military court, 'his condemnation, followed by what you well know would have happened, would not have been a judicial error.' While the spectators were still gasping at this extraordinary statement from the Attorney General, their astonishment turned to laughter as Laval answered: 'That would have deprived me of the pleasure of listening to you.'

'It would have satisfied the conscience of every Frenchman,' said Mornet. He claimed that the prosecution had performed its duty in putting all the necessary documents at the disposal of the defence. Baraduc and Naud were immediately on their feet, shouting: 'No! No! That is untrue!'

Their objections were ignored. Mongibeaux began to put a question to Laval and, seeing that he was about to interrupt, shouted: 'My voice is still strong enough to drown yours – and I will use it.' Laval extended his arms and answered: 'I said nothing.'

'I do not wish to appear in the light of a prosecutor –' Mongibeaux began. There was an outburst of ironic laughter in court. The jurymen began to clamour for the court to be cleared. From now onwards there was almost incessant uproar, Laval and Naud

shouting on one side, Mongibeaux, Mornet and the jurymen on the other.

Laval, trembling with rage: 'You want everything except the truth!'

Mongibeaux: 'We are no longer in a hall of justice.'

Laval, folding his arms: 'This is incredible. I want to reply to the Attorney General.'

Mongibeaux: 'The Court does not wish you to reply to the Attorney General . . . I have put a question to which we want you to reply.'

Laval: 'I will answer you very plainly, but I ask you to admit that my defence is not made any easier, either by the incomplete *instruction*—'

Mongibeaux: 'Nor perhaps by your actions over four years which are very well known to the whole of France!'

Laval: 'I think it would be better if you answered your questions instead of me.'

Mongibeaux: 'Do you persist in that attitude?'

Laval: 'You put the question and the answer at the same time. We'd better leave it at that, as an example of the serenity and majesty of your justice.'

Mongibeaux: 'In your position, do you think you are assured of impunity?'

Laval: 'I don't think myself assured of impunity; but there is something which is above us all, above you and above me: that is the truth and the justice of which you should be the expression.'

The jurymen began to shout: 'Justice will be done!' and Laval shouted back: 'It will be done, yes, but truth will remain!' 'It will be French!' shouted another jurymen.

Mongibeaux said: 'Somebody will have the last word – and that is the High Court.' Laval sat down in his chair: 'You have it,' he said.

'You no longer mean to reply?' Mongibeaux asked. 'No,' said Laval. 'In view of your attacks, the way you interrogate me: you provide both the questions and the answers.'

The uproar was beginning at the back of the court again. Mongibeaux ordered the accused to be taken away. As Laval rose to his feet, the jury rose too, shouting: 'Skunk! A rope for his

neck! No, a dozen bullets in his hide! You won't be so talkative in a fortnight's time! He hasn't changed!

Laval swung round and snarled: 'No – and I shan't change now.' He moved off, saying: 'This is incredible – the jury, before even judging me——' And a jurymen yelled at the top of his voice: 'We've judged you already. And France has judged you too!'

In the waiting-room at the side of the court he found Josée and his wife, who already realised that there was no hope. She put her arms round him. 'Finish, Pierre,' she said. 'But finish big! Later, the world will know what you were.'

An hour later he was recalled to the court. Mongibeaux asked him if he were ready to reply to further questions. Laval answered: 'Monsieur le Président, the insulting manner in which you questioned me just now and the demonstrations from certain of the jurymen have shown me that I may be the victim of a judicial crime. I do not wish to be an accomplice. I prefer to remain silent.'

Mongibeaux ordered the witnesses to be called, and it was discovered that none was present. The Court was adjourned once more and Laval refused to return.

Jaffré spent most of Sunday with him at the depot. He read through the newspapers, decided that they were on the whole favourable, though the headlines were slanted against him, and talked of the fine defence he had prepared on the subject of Alsace-Lorraine.

On Monday the three lawyers were summoned to the Ministry of Justice, where the Minister begged them to persuade Laval to return to court: assuring them that he would be allowed to speak as long as he wanted and that the case would be adjourned for the elections if necessary. Baraduc suspected this was merely a trap, an attempt to spread a veneer of legality over the proceedings. Laval agreed with him and maintained his refusal to appear. Mongibeaux sent for the lawyers and pleaded that General de Gaulle was insisting that they should appear at the bar. They replied that they must abide by Laval's decision.

At five o'clock on Tuesday afternoon the Court, without hearing any witnesses for the defence, condemned Laval to death.

Naud and Jaffré were sitting talking with him when Baraduc arrived with the news. Laval looked up. 'Death?' he asked. Baraduc nodded. Laval asked for a sheet of paper and began to write to his wife and daughter. In a husky voice, he said: 'I am in excellent spirits.'

He was taken to Fresnes on Wednesday the 10th and put into the condemned block. His suit was taken from him and he was given a denim jacket and trousers, and chains were put round his ankles. At first he had difficulty in walking and said to Jaffré: 'I feel a bit like a cowboy; or perhaps a dancing bear.' He was grateful that they had left him his silk shirt, and the mayoral sash from Aubervilliers, which he wore around his neck.

He began again to spend much of his time writing, helped by Jaffré: again setting out his defence, but knowing that it would not save him. A few days later he gave most of his papers to Baraduc, saying that he knew that after his death his cell would be searched and they would be destroyed. 'You can't save my life, but you can save my memory,' he said.

He seemed quite calm, crouched on the chained stool and endlessly smoking cigarettes. 'After sixty-two years of a full life, I'm ready to go,' he said. 'But they could have handled it differently. Banish me, for instance, since they don't want me any more.' He paused a moment. 'I could have found a little bit of country, a river where I could have gone fishing.' He grinned and added: 'And within two years they'd have called me back again.'

He played with the idea a little more. 'Or they could shove me in gaol – and leave me there. Whenever they needed me, they could come and consult me.' His voice changed. 'They need my death. I must be wrong so that they shall be right.'

He had refused to allow his lawyers to enter a plea for pardon, but they had asked for an audience with de Gaulle, hoping that they could persuade him to order a re-trial. On Friday, 12 October they were told that the General would see them that evening at six o'clock. Laval was in a very nervous condition when they left him: today was Friday, tomorrow was the thirteenth.

De Gaulle received them in his office at the Ministry of National Defence in the Rue Saint-Dominique. He was standing close to the door as they filed in. He bowed to them but did not

speak. He sat at his desk and lit a cigarette while they moved to the row of chairs in front of it.

Naud broke the silence by assuring the General that he was not in sympathy with Laval's politics and had in fact been a member of the Resistance. But Laval's trial should have been the occasion to review the whole problem of collaboration, to fix the guilt and absolve the innocent. It would both justify and end the 'purge' in France which had been freely criticised abroad.

Except for the occasional raising of the cigarette to his lips, the General remained immobile, a massive uniformed figure behind the desk, his eyes fixed on some point on the wall above and behind them. When Naud had finished speaking, de Gaulle's eyes seemed to glide slightly along the wall until the magisterial nose was designating the next speaker.

Baraduc spoke of the insufficient preparation for the trial, Jaffré of the scandalous conduct of the jury and the judges. When Jaffré had finished there was a moment's silence. Then de Gaulle, speaking for the first time, asked: 'You have nothing further to say, gentlemen?' They said they had not. He rose and walked over to the door. As they went out he shook their hands. . . .

Laval sat hunched over his table in cell No. 7 in the death block. He had begun his long night of letter-writing, for, though he had still three days to live, he believed that tomorrow's dawn would be his last. To his daughter he wrote:

'I am about to disappear from this world, to mingle with the earth that absorbs us all; but my spirit will survive and it will never leave you. I shall always be with you and your mother, so that you may not lose heart. I ask you not to think of avenging me; but since you have no need to blush for me you may defend my memory. Do this peacefully, without ill-will, in the certainty that with the impartial turn of the wheel I shall find a place in the hearts of good men. Hold yourself upright in the face of misfortune. The whole of France now knows what efforts have been made to prevent my speaking or defending myself. Presently she will demand an explanation and a reckoning. My own were not allowed to be heard. May my sacrifice at least be of service to those who have been unjustly attacked or threatened because they too have wished to serve our country in her unhappy days.'

APPENDIX

Pierre Laval: Some Dates

- 1883—28 June: born at Chateldon.
- 1902—Passes final examination for *baccalauréat*.
- 1903—Joins Socialist Party at Saint-Etienne.
- 1909—Admitted to Paris Bar. 20 October: marries Eugénie Claussat.
- 1910—Candidate for Chamber of Deputies at Neuilly-Boulogne-Billancourt. Defeated.
- 1911—Birth of only child, Josée.
- 1914—Elected Deputy for Aubervilliers-Villemomble.
- 1917—Refuses Under-Secretaryship of State in Clemenceau's Cabinet.
- 1919—Defeated at post-war election.
- 1920—Leaves Socialist Party.
- 1922—Buys plot of land at Aubervilliers.
- 1923—Elected to municipal council of Aubervilliers.
- 1924—Elected Mayor of Aubervilliers. Re-elected to Chamber of Deputies. Buys Domaine de la Corbière.
- 1925—April: first Cabinet post, as Minister of Public Works in Painlevé's Government. Then Under-Secretary of State in Briand's Cabinet. Buys house in the Villa Saïd.
- 1926—Minister of Justice from March until fall of Briand's Government in July.
- 1927—Elected Senator for the Department of the Seine. Buys the *Moniteur du Puy-de-Dôme* and printing works at Clermont-Ferrand.
- 1928—Buys Radio-Lyon and the *Lyon Républicain*.

- 1930—*March*: Minister of Labour in Tardieu's Cabinet until December.
- 1931—*January*: forms his first Government, combining Ministry of the Interior with Presidency of the Council.
May: formally resigns on appointment of new President of the Republic (Paul Doumer) and immediately resumes office.
September: orders loan of three thousand million gold francs to Bank of England. Visits Brüning and Hindenburg in Berlin.
October: visits Hoover in Washington.
December: buys the château of Chateldon; sells the *Lyon Républicain*.
- 1932—*January*: reforms Cabinet and takes over Ministry of Foreign Affairs on resignation of Briand.
February: defeated. Accepts Ministry of Labour in Tardieu's Cabinet until June.
- 1934—*February*: Minister of Colonies in Doumergue's Cabinet.
October: appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs after assassination of Barthou.
November: retains Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Flandin's Government.
- 1935—*January*: in Rome for talks with Mussolini and audience with Pope.
February: talks with Schuschnigg in Paris.
April: with Flandin, MacDonald and Mussolini at Stresa. Condemns Germany at Geneva, in the names of France, Britain and Italy.
May: talks with Stalin in Moscow.
June: succeeds Flandin as President of the Council. Refuses to approve Anglo-German naval treaty.
July: announces first batch of decree-laws to meet financial crisis.
August: marriage of Josée Laval to René de Chambrun.
December: agrees with Sir Samuel Hoare on proposal for ending Abyssinian war.
- 1936—*January*: resigns after attacks on his foreign and financial policies.

- 1940—22 *June*: appointed Minister of State in Pétain's Cabinet, then Vice-President of the Council.
12 *July*: nominated as Pétain's successor.
19 *July*: meets Abetz in Paris.
22 and 24 *October*: meets Hitler at Montoire-sur-Loir.
13 *December*: is dismissed and arrested.
- 1941—18 *January*: meets Pétain at La Ferté-Hauterive.
27 *August*: wounded at Versailles.
- 1942—26 *March*: meets Pétain in forest of Randan.
17 *April*: returns as President of the Council, Minister of the Interior, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Information.
22 *June*: announces the *relève* and says '*je souhaite la victoire de l'Allemagne*'.
4 *September*: institutes Compulsory Labour Service and direction of labour.
10 *November*: meets Hitler at Munich, following the Allied landings in North Africa.
15 *December*: meets Hitler at Görlitz.
- 1943—17 *February*: calls up the classes of 1920, 1921, 1922 for Compulsory Labour Service.
29 *April*: final meeting with Hitler at Berchtesgaden.
6 *August*: refuses to send any more workers to Germany.
17 *September*: escapes bomb attempt on road to Chateldon.
4 *December*: Ribbentrop demands reconstruction of Government with pro-Nazi members.
- 1944—6 *January*: Darnand and Henriot admitted to Cabinet; joined by Déat in April.
6 *June*: Allied landings in France. Laval broadcasts that 'France is not in the war' and forbids Frenchmen to participate on either side.
12 *July*: defeats pro-Nazi Cabinet plot.
8 *August*: leaves Chateldon for Paris.
12 *August*: brings Herriot to Paris for summoning of the National Assembly.
17 *August*: taken under escort to Belfort.
9 *September*: taken to Sigmaringen.
- 1945—2 *May*: arrives in Barcelona.

- 1 *August*: flown to Le Bourget under escort.
- 4 *October*: brought to trial before the High Court.
- 6 *October*: refuses to make further appearances in court.
- 9 *October*: condemned to death.
- 15 *October*: executed by shooting at Fresnes.

SOURCES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The only document of any length that Laval left is the defence which he prepared in his cell at Fresnes, published with a preface by his daughter, Josée de Chambrun, under the title of *Laval parle* (Geneva, 1947). Two adulatory biographies of him were written before the war by Odette Pannetier, *Pierre Laval* (Paris, 1936), and by his favourite astrologer, Maurice Privat, *Pierre Laval* (Paris, 1935). Two attacks were published during the war: Henri Torrès, *Pierre Laval* (London, 1942) and Pierre Tissier, *I Worked with Laval* (London, 1942). Since the war, defences of him have been written by his former associates: Julien Clermont (pseudonym for Georges Hilaire), *L'Homme qu'il fallait tuer* (Paris, 1949); Jacques Guérard, *Criminel de Paix* (Paris, 1953); Michel Letan, *Pierre Laval de l'armistice au poteau* (Paris, 1947); Alfred Mallet, *Pierre Laval* (Paris, 1955); Maurice Privat, *Pierre Laval, cet inconnu* (Paris, 1948).

All three of his lawyers published books describing their brief acquaintance with him and reporting much of his conversation: Jacques Baraduc, *Dans la cellule de Pierre Laval* (Paris, 1948); Yves-Frédéric Jaffré, *Les derniers propos de Pierre Laval* (Paris, 1953); Albert Naud, *Pourquoi je n'ai pas défendu Pierre Laval* (Paris, 1948). Baraduc also published a collection of documents from German sources, *Tout ce qu'on vous a caché* (Paris, 1949). Laval's son-in-law, René de Chambrun, has collected more than three hundred sworn statements from French, German and American witnesses and lodged them in the Hoover War Library of Stanford University. Most of these have been published under the title of *La vie de France sous l'occupation* (Paris, 1957). Their purpose is to present a favourable picture of the Vichy Government in general and of Laval in particular. With them may be read, with similar caution, the reply by Arnoult, Billig and others, *La France sous l'occupation* (Paris, 1959).

The report of the official commission set up in 1948, *Rapport sur les événements survenus en France de 1935 à 1945—Assemblée Nationale, No. 2344* (Paris, 1951), contains testimony from many prominent Vichy personalities, though much of the material is a repetition of evidence given at the trials of Abetz, Benoist-Méchin, Brasillach, Brinon, Darnand, Flandin, Luchaire, Oberg, Pétain, Pucheu and Vallat, all of which have appeared in book form. Additional documents were revealed by Louis Noguères, a former President of the High Court, in *Le véritable procès du Maréchal Pétain* (Paris, 1955).

The following list is restricted almost entirely to books written by those who had first-hand contact with Laval or Pétain. It is by no means a complete acknowledgement of the books I have consulted; neither have I made mention of contemporary newspapers and periodicals or of the many friends, enemies and bewildered observers of Laval who have been kind enough to give me information in Paris, Aubervilliers, Chateldon, Montoire-sur-Loir, Moulins and other places, and to whom I repeat my thanks.

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Les Actes des Apôtres, Paris: *L'homme qu'il fallait tuer*, by Julien Clermont; André Bonne, Paris: *Les derniers propos de Pierre Laval*, by Yves-Frédéric Jaffré, and *Le Maréchal aux liens*, by Jean Tracou; Le Cheval Ailé, Geneva: *Le temps des illusions*, by H. du Moulin de la Barthète; Eyre and Spottiswoode, London: *The Private Diaries of Paul Baudouin* (Sir Charles Petrie's translation of *Neuf mois au gouvernement*); Fayard, Paris: *Pourquoi je n'ai pas défendu Pierre Laval*, by Albert Naud; Flammarion, Paris: *La chronique de Vichy*, by Maurice Martin du Gard; Plon, Paris: *Le drame de Vichy*, by Yves Bouthillier; Self, Paris: *Dans la cellule de Pierre Laval*, by Jacques Baraduc.

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1931 he was named Man of the Year by *Time* magazine. But his ambition, pride and the temper of the times caused his countrymen to turn their backs on him and by 1940 he had been treated to the enforced retirement from which he emerged to collaborate with his nation's Nazi conquerors.

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